

Kalevala and Africa

M.M. MULOKOZI

University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the Kiswahili translation of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, is a major literary event for Africa. According to the translator, Jan Knappert, this is the second time that the epic is being rendered into an indigenous African language. The first translation was made into Fula by the late Alfa Diallo (Knappert 1992).

The translation enables the Kiswahili speaking Africans to share in one of the highest achievements of world literature. And through Kiswahili, Africa will benefit, for Kiswahili is already becoming the language of all Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora¹

The *Kalevala* is the finest expression of the Finnish national spirit, identity and heritage. It is a product of centuries of struggle of the Finnish people for national independence and survival against powerful Western and Eastern forces. Moreover, it is the repository and summing-up of the Finnish collective memory, philosophy and world view, language, arts and beliefs, as preserved by generations of ordinary peasants in the Finnish countryside.

The publication of the complete edition of the *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot in 1849 was an event of national significance for the Finns, and of literary significance for the world. Since then, the epic has reportedly been translated into more than thirty languages worldwide (Branch in Kirby W.F. (Tr.) 1895: xi).

The purpose of this brief essay is to examine the significance of the *Kalevala* for the African continent. We see this significance as being multifaceted:

- (a) *Political-cultural*: a result of similar experiences of alien subjugation and hence a quest for identity and nationhood.
- (b) *Literary*: Similarity of the literary circumstances of the evolution of the *Kalevala*, marked by a transition from orality to literarity and from a rural, subsistence culture to an urbanized commercialized culture.
- (c) *Linguistic*: A rejection of alien "learned" languages in favour of the local "rustic" languages, and hence the transformation of the indigenous languages into tools of nationhood and eventually of science and technology.
- (d) *Academic*: The influence of the *Kalevala* in the academic arena, especially in the development of disciplines such as folklore, (e.g. oral literature) and analytical methodologies for the same. Also pertinent is the controversy

regarding the concepts of "folklore" versus "fakelore", aroused by the *Kalevala* and kindred compositions.

These four dimensions of the *Kalevala's* significance for Africa will be elaborated in this essay. The elaboration will be preceded by a brief survey of the evolution of the *Kalevala* in its political-historical context, and its significance for the Finns.

1.0 THE EVOLUTION OF THE KALEVALA

1.1 THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The *Kalevala* arose out of the struggles of the Finnish people for nationhood and identity. Sandwiched between two big powers, Sweden in the west and Tsarist Russia in the east, Finland was for many centuries a pawn in the imperial rivalry of the two powers. Owing to its geography, Finland was relatively insulated from alien influences until about A.D. 1000, when the Greek Orthodox Church was introduced through Russia. The Orthodox Church, however, did not actively suppress the indigenous beliefs and religious system. The Catholic Church, arriving from Sweden in A.D. 1115, was less tolerant and virtually wiped out the Finnish traditional beliefs and lore in the western part of Finland in which it was well-established. The remote parts, such as Karelia, where the *Kalevala* songs were collected by Lönnrot, remained more or less unscathed until the 18th century. The Lutheran Church, introduced in the 16th century, was also intolerant of the traditional lore.

This cultural-religious suppression was accompanied by political subjugation. From about A.D. 1200 to 1809, Finland was under Swedish rule, and Swedish was the language of education, government and "high culture". After the Napoleonic wars Finland fell under Russia (1809-1917). Only the Russian Revolution of 1917 enabled Finland to gain its independence, after a bitter struggle against the Red Army.

The *Kalevala* evolved against this background of political and cultural suppression. It arose out of the nationalist and romantic awakening of the early nineteenth century which was sweeping all over Europe.

Finnish national awakening began as a cultural-cum-intellectual movement. Finnish and other European intellectuals argued that a nation must possess "a distinctive cultural identity founded on the language and oral literature of the ordinary, unlettered people" (Branch 1985: xi). At that time, many educated Finns did not even speak Finnish: "Of the educated people, only the clergy were still proficient in Finnish" (Hanalainen 1982: 231).

No wonder enlightened Finns such as A.I. Arwidsson (1791-1858) argued: "We are not Swedes, we will not become Russians, and so we must be Finns" (Preminger et al 1974: 277).

With this realization, studies in Finnish history and culture were started at Turku University by Prof. Henrik G. Porthan (1739-1804) (Hanalainen, 1982). Soon another scholar, Carl A. Gottlund (1796-1875), floated the idea of creating a national epic. The idea was taken up by scholars such as Reinhold von Becker (1788-1858), who was Lonnrot's teacher, and Zacharis Topelius (1781-1831). These scholars began to collect folklore from the Finnish countryside and even published several collections (Alphonso-Karkala 1984: 57).

It was then that Elias Lönnrot (1802-84) came along, initially as a student of von Becker, and turned Gottlund's call into his lifelong dream and quest. The result was the *Kalevala*.

1.2 COLLECTION AND COMPILATION OF THE SONGS

1.2.1 Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884)

The collector and compiler of the *Kalevala* was a young medical doctor by the name Elias Lönnrot. Inspired and encouraged by his mentor, Reinhold von Becker, Lönnrot made several field trips to Finnish Karelia between 1833 and 1849, collecting oral songs, tales and proverbs from the rural people. The songs he collected included the ancient pre-Christian stories and legends explaining the origins of the Finnish nation and civilization. Lönnrot was instrumental in founding the Finnish Literature Society (FLS) in 1831. His researches and publications were henceforth largely sponsored by the society. Lönnrot believed like the FLS, that:

In the memories, customs and thoughts of the past a nation sees the roots of its own being and understands its own condition and worth.
(from the *Rules* of the FLS, quoted by Haavio 1971: 57).

Lönnrot believed that the songs about the ancient Finnish heroes such as Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, Lemminkäinen, Kullervo, Louhi and others that he collected were fragments of an old Finnish epic that had somehow been forgotten. Hence he set out to recreate the epic from the fragments.

His first attempts resulted in the *Alku Kalevala* epic of 1835, which had only 5052 lines and centered on the adventures of the patriarchal hero, Väinämöinen. In the same year, he published the *Old Kalevala* epic. This had 12078 lines, and included more episodes and heroes. In 1849, Lönnrot published the final, 22,795 line version. The poem at once became a Finnish cultural and national monument.

1.2.2 The Epic

The building blocks of the *Kalevala* are heroic songs (more than 30 in different variants were used), lyric songs, incantations, wedding songs, laments and

proverbs from Finnish folklore. These materials were tailored to fit into the tapestry designed by Lönnrot (who incidentally was a tailor's son). Hence, the conception of the epic and the arrangement of its various pieces is Lönnrot's, but the pieces used are traditional. This fusion of the traditional and the personal, of orature and literarity, has been criticised by the folklore purists as an attempt to create "fakelore" (Dorson 1950; Dundes 1984: 155-71), but others see it as a creative transformation of folklore to serve modern needs (Alphonso-Karkala 1984).

The poem is a symbolic representation of the Finnish history and cosmos from creation to the apocalyptic start of a new (Christian?) era. It begins with the creation of the universe as a result of the copulation of the Virgin of the Air with the elements. It then proceeds to depict the unusual birth of the culture hero, Väinämöinen, the various stages of human cultural evolution, such as the invention of fire, the rise of agriculture, the rise of technology (discovery of iron), and so on until the coming of a new era presaged by the virgin birth of the future leader (Christ?).

The plot of the *Kalevala* centers around the usual epic themes: the fight over a maiden, and the quest for power, symbolized in the inscrutable object known as the *sampo*. The central conflict is between the kingdoms of Karelia and Pohjola. The queen of Pohjola, Louhi, possesses the maiden and the *sampo*. The heroes of Karelia must secure the two from her. The *Kalevala* (people of Karelia) are partially victorious: they win the maiden and the *sampo*, only to lose them again later. However, in the process they learn and acquire wisdom, human relations, secret arts, heroism and perseverance. They also acquire culture and prosperity, fertility and enlightenment.

In the *Kalevala*, the world of humans interacts with that of the spirits. Men and gods intermingle, the heroes are either shamans or demi-gods, and a fusion of "mars and muse"² is achieved, especially in the person of the central character, the grand old man, Väinämöinen.

The *Kalevala* is not simply a tale of romance, war and destruction; it is a tale of creation, not only in the etiological sense but also in the sense of procreation, of reproduction. In this process the creative force is not male, but female. We see a god-creator who is a "She" and not a "He"; we see a positive, constructive feminine force pitted against a negative, destructive masculine force. Woman is accorded her rightful place as the primordial mother, the source of all life and sustenance.

The *Kalevala* is, like Kitereza's great novel, *Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka na Ntuhanalwo na Bulihwali* (1981),³ and unlike Homer's *Iliad*, about the everyday life of the people of rural Finland in pre-Christian times, times when the people, though not wealthy, were free, satisfied, dignified and heroic.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE FINNS

The *Kalevala* acquired significance among the Finns as a national symbol and weapon in their struggle for national liberation and identity. It united the people ideologically and culturally, and became a source of strength and inspiration for them in the difficult years that followed its publication.

On the level of language, the epic rejuvenated and standardized the Finnish language, and enriched it with new and archaic vocabulary and expressions.

In literature, the epic proved to the Finns that their language was capable of expressing great ideas and truths, that indeed Finnish literature could and should be written in Finnish. Hence, the epic was instrumental in the change of the literary language from Swedish to Finnish. Numerous writers were inspired by the *Kalevala*, for instance Aleksis Kivi and Eino Leino.

In folklore, Lönnrot's feat inspired many other scholars to collect more material from the countryside. Some even went as far as creating other epics on similar lines, for instance the *Kalevipoeg* epic of Estonia, compiled by Friedrich Faehlmann in the 1830s (Kirby 1895).

In art and music, painters such as Akseli Gallén-Kallela, sculptors such as Väino Aaltonen, and musician's such as Jean Sibelius were inspired by the *Kalevala*.

In the academia, a whole school of Finnish folkloristics grew around the *Kalevala*, producing such great scholars as Julius Krohn (1835-1888), his son, Kaarle Krohn (1863-1933), Antti Aarne (1867-1925), etc. That school was to influence the study of folklore worldwide (cf. the Aarne-Thompson tale type index). No wonder Finland has become the Mecca of folklore scholars.

2.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KALEVALA FOR AFRICA

2.1 HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PARALLELS

The significance of the *Kalevala* for Africa is first and foremost dictated by the historical, cultural and political conditions obtaining in Africa today, conditions which are in many ways similar to the conditions that obtained in Finland during Lönnrot's time.

The most obvious fact is that most of Africa has only recently emerged from colonial subjugation. Equally obvious is the fact that the African countries, though nominally free, are still economically and culturally controlled by the former colonial and other big powers. This situation is akin to that of Finland between 1809 and 1917, when it was under the indirect rule of Russia.

Another pertinent parallel is that African countries are culturally sandwiched between two power blocks: the western "Christian" block, and the eastern "Islamic" block. The two blocks are endeavouring to suppress and denigrate the

African heritage: the beliefs, religious rites and rituals, names, philosophies and institutions, exactly in the same way that Catholicism and Protestantism suppressed the indigenous Finnish culture.⁴

In such a situation, the major political issue is the national question. All the social classes in the country have to unite and work together to forge a nation and a national identity. This should come about as a result of the internal evolutionary process, and as a response to the external threat. Such a process demands or needs certain cultural symbols and tools, such as national languages and national epics. This brings us to the literary question.

2.2 LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

The literary parallels between 19th century Finland and 20th century African countries are twofold:

- (a) Existence of a rich but denigrated oral literature repertory.
- (b) The virtual absence of a written literature in the national language(s).

The Finnish *Kalevala* approach can conceivably be used to tackle both problems. The rich African folklore and oral literature can be and should be collected (today we have better technology to do that than was available to Lönnrot), preserved and disseminated in various forms (print, audio-visual media, pictorial media, etc.) for the benefit of our societies.

In certain instances, it is possible to tap some of the traditional heroic songs, legends, myths etc. to create monumental national epics that may equal or rival the *Kalevala*, and that would be accepted and appreciated by the people. Indeed, attempts have already been made in that direction. Thus written epics exist about the following African heroes and nations:

Nation	Hero	Creator/compiler
Amazulu	Chaka	1.Thomas Mofolo 2. Mazisi Kunene
Mandinga	Sundiata	T. Niane
Waswahili	Fumo Liongo	Mohamed Kijumwa
Bahaya(Waziba)	Kibi	M. Mulokozi

Many more could be created, since the raw materials are, happily, still there. Compilation of written epics from oral material could also serve as a means of alleviating the problem of lack of reading matter in the indigenous languages. They would introduce the people to literacy, serve as initial models for emerging writers, and contribute to the inevitable transition from orality to literarity.

2.3 LINGUISTIC SIGNIFICANCE

African states today, even monolingual ones, still cling to colonial languages under various pretexts, the most common being that of the alleged need to combat "tribalism". This situation is extremely dangerous for African culture and identity. It means that in this matter we are behind the Finnish intellectual of the early 19th century. Just as the *Kalevala* was instrumental in the standardization of Finnish and in fostering its introduction into the educational system, we need to create an indigenous literature that would do the same for our own languages.

2.4 ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE

In the world of academia, the *Kalevala* inspired scientific researches and study of the creative products of the people within Finland and, later, throughout Europe and America. The result has enriched our understanding of human history, the evolution of culture and cultural artefacts, the nature and peculiarities of oral art, the evolution and spread of languages, beliefs and world views, etc.

We need to undertake similar studies of African folklore so as to fully understand and appreciate our past and the genius of our people. Africa is currently probably the only continent in which oral arts still thrive in virtually undiluted forms, in which new oral epics are still being created⁵. Africa, therefore, has a lot to contribute to the world of scholarship regarding the nature, creation and transmission of oral literature. The current dominant theories on oral literature, theories by scholars such as M. Parry and Albert Lord, V. Propp, Dan Ben Amos, Alan Dundes, etc., based largely on western data, may well be up-dated, confirmed or disapproved, if African data were to be taken into account. And this is the task of our African Lönnrots, Krohns, Aarnes and Honkos⁶.

3.0 CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to highlight the significance of the epic of *Kalevala* for the African peoples. We have argued that the *Kalevala* has special significance for Africa owing to the fact that it arose from an historical situation that is somewhat similar to the African situation today. Hence its objectives and results have many lessons for our countries.

We have shown that the *Kalevala's* significance is four fold: it is political-historical, in the sense that it is an example of how a literary heritage can be transformed and utilized in the cause of national identity and liberation. It is literary in that it marks a transition from orality to literarity. It is linguistic in that it is an example of how national pre-capitalist languages can be standardized and modernized through literature. Finally, its significance has an academic dimension

in that the theories, discoveries and studies directly or indirectly connected with the *Kalevala* can be of use in the study of our own African oral literatures and traditions.

NOTES

1. Many people of African origin in the U.S.A. and the Caribbeans regard Kiswahili as their "national language", a language that expresses their African identity and aspirations.
2. "Mars and Muse": a phrase coined by M. Bowra (1966) to describe the essence of epic. "Mars" represents war while "muse" represents music or poetry.
3. A Swahili novel about life in pre-colonial Ukerewe in Tanzania. Available in the German language under the title *Herr Myombekere und frau Bugonoka* (Peter Hammer Verlag).
4. We are posing this issue as a problem needing an acceptable solution through the concerted efforts of all Africans: Muslims, Christians and Traditionalists alike. We are not posing it as an invective against the two "semitic" religions. Maybe the best solution under the present conditions would be to create a fusion of the best from both worlds, the "semitic" and the traditional African, instead of the present tendency towards intolerance and suppression of things African.
5. The present writer collected several such epics during his field research in Kagera Region, Tanzania, in the early 1980's (cf. the epic on the "Kagera War" created by Raphael Njunwa in 1979).
6. Julius Krohn (1835-1888), Kaarle Krohn (1863-1933), Antti Aarne (1867-1925) and Lauri Honko are just a few among outstanding Finnish scholars within the *Kalevala* tradition.

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