

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the River Congo: Paul Lomami Tchibamba, Jules Verne and Postcolonial Intertextuality

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Paul Lomami Tchibamba (1914-85) is often described as the Congo's first novelist (Kadima-Nzuji, preface to *Ngando* 8) and yet scholarship on his work in English is somewhat scarce; the few English-language works on his novels that do exist include articles by Halen (2008), Gehrmann (2009) and Kapanga (2009, 2017). Previous research in French and English has depicted Tchibamba's work as a straightforward example of "writing back" to the colonial canon. When examining Tchibamba's references to European culture, they also follow a simplistic model of counter-discourse without acknowledging the complex, ambiguous and sometimes positive way in which Tchibamba interacts with his European intertexts. To name a few examples, Gehrmann has described a 'textual confrontation' (15), without examining the intricacies of Tchibamba's references to European authors. Riva has acknowledged that Tchibamba's fantastical landscapes owe a debt to nineteenth-century aesthetic devices such as the diorama, but then incongruously argues that the fantasy realms of this era constitute "the main target of Tchibamba's attacks" (orig. qtd 74).¹ Because scholarship on intertextuality is lacking, this article conducts the first analysis of Tchibamba's intertextual dialogue with European authors, specifically nineteenth-century French author Jules Verne.

Verne is chosen for the specific reason that he was a favourite of Tchibamba, and thus this article advances scholarship on Tchibamba's work by demonstrating how his writing responds to Verne by blending his scientific vocabulary and fantastical voyages with traditional Congolese orature. I examine existing scholarship on colonial and postcolonial intertextuality, and argue that Tchibamba's novel *Ngando* (1948), published during Belgian colonial occupation, displays

intertextual features that critics had seen previously as restricted to literature published after decolonization. I then analyze how Tchibamba deploys intertextual references to Verne in later work, in order to create an intricate blend of polyphony, pastiche, parody and critique. Bringing together comparative research insights from Congolese and French literature, this article also accomplishes close textual analysis via literary translation. To that end, this article also contains the first English translations of excerpts from Tchibamba's novella *Légende de Londema*.

Verne's images of underwater realms, and anticolonial strains in his writing, helped shape Tchibamba's polyphonic style and anticolonial magical realism. I examine postcolonial intertextuality in two of Tchibamba's novellas: *Ngando* (1948) and *Légende de Londema, Suzeraine de Mitsoué-ba-Ngomi* (1974). The first novella was published in the later days of Belgian colonialism, twelve years before the Congo achieved independence. *Légende de Londema* is set during the early days of European exploration, but was published after Mobutu's drive for *authenticité*. This aimed at purging the Congo of colonial cultural influence and creating a new cultural consciousness for the country (van Reybrouck 351). The two novels are linked by the author's evocation of realms below the River Congo as sites of anti-colonial resistance, and by his use of literary devices developed from Verne's fantastical underwater realms.

Tchibamba's literary career began with the publication of his award-winning novella *Ngando* in 1948. This important text is often described as the source of Congolese fiction (Kadima-Nzujii, preface to *Ngando* 8). Since it has not been translated into English in its entirety, a brief synopsis is useful here. The book reworks a traditional tale of the spirit-world by setting it during the time of early European colonialism. This sees the schoolboy Musolinga playing truant from school, exploring the Kinshasa docks and riverbank. He is captured by a crocodile sent by a vengeful sorceress. The crocodile drags him down to the depths of the spirit-world, at the bottom of the Congo River's Malebo Pool. Musolinga is rescued by his father; father and son are transported to the spirit-realm at the end of the book. Tchibamba had preceded his novella with a provocative political essay on the status of the *évolués* (the emergent, educated Congolese middle class), in the magazine *La Voix du Congolais*, in 1945. These works were followed by the magical realist tale *La Récompense de la cruauté* [*The Reward for Cruelty*] and the historical novella *N'Gobila des Mswata et Mistantèle*, both written in 1971 and published by Valentin Mudimbe's imprint Le Mont Noir the following year. 1974 saw the

publication of his realistic novella *Faire médicament*, and his magical realist novella *Légende de Londema*. His last novel, *Ah! Mbongo* [*Oh! Money*] was begun after 1948, went through many drafts, was finished in 1978 and was posthumously published in 2007, with editorial help from Alain Mabanckou. Several previously unpublished works appeared posthumously in *La Saga des Bakoyo Ngombé et autres inédits* [*The Saga of the Bakoyo Ngombé and Other Unpublished Works*] in 2014. Two main literary modes can be identified in Tchibamba's fiction: magical realism and picaresque historical realism. Silvia Riva identifies *Ngando*, *La Récompense ...*, elements of *N'Gobila* and *Légende ...* as Tchibamba's "cycle du merveilleux" (75), employing elements of magical realism, whereas novels such as *Ah! Mbongo* are more "picaresque[s]" (80).

The problem with Riva and Gehrman's idea of Tchibamba's work as a "textual confrontation" or "attack" is that it glosses over the complexities of his dialogue with earlier writings. There is absolutely no doubt that Tchibamba condemns the Belgian colonial regime in both his articles and his fiction. Yet his work is too nuanced to be relegated to a simplistic paradigm whereby the "Empire writes back" to the imperial "centre" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 33). Back in 1995, Elleke Boehmer deployed postcolonial and post-structuralist theory to complicate the "warring dichotomy" of postcolonial texts and their canonical European predecessors. She argues that via intertextual references to European authors, postcolonial writers "also mixed up and upturned dominant meanings" (163). Further important work on the significance of canonical European authors for African literature has been conducted by Byron Caminero-Santangelo, who notes that "[i]n an effort to place the 'classics' in a colonial tradition, those ascribing to the writing back model reduce their significance to a collusion with colonial discourse" (15).

Earlier critics have not commented on how Tchibamba's work resists the simplistic model of "writing back" by building on anticolonial elements in his European intertexts. Tchibamba's own preface to his first novella has encouraged a univocally 'nativist' critical response to his entire body of work. In an italicized author's note that begins *Ngando*, Tchibamba writes that he has based his work on "the purely indigenous core."² He writes that his project is to record the means by which "we Bantus, the Blacks of Central Africa, understand the universe" (1982, 15).³ Previous critics have taken the words of the preface at face value, without exploring the nuances of Tchibamba's relationship with European literature. Mukala Kadima-Nzuji's preface to the 1982 edition of *Ngando* is a case in point. He

writes that the book perfectly exemplified *Présence Africaine*'s "defence and illustration of the values of black civilization" (9).⁴ Eliane Tchibamba states: "Tchibamba's novel-story *Ngando* brings to light the role of the supernatural in the everyday lives of Africans, who find themselves constantly torn between the reality of things and their ancestral beliefs in myths, between the wondrous and the horrific" (Tchibamba 2007, 10-11).⁵ Riva notes that the novels shortlisted for the 1948 prize evidence "the desire to reconstruct, albeit on a fictional level, a conception of the world that was in danger of disappearing, and, at the same time, to restore the often-derided "black people's mentality" (2006, 57).⁶ Though it is complicated by his use of European intertexts, this is certainly one facet of Tchibamba's project. Indeed, there are parallels between Tchibamba's intertextual method in *Ngando*, and the writings of Amos Tutuola. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) appeared four years after *Ngando*, and is often described as the first anglophone African novel to be published outside Africa. Tutuola combined Yoruba folktales with the otherworldly settings and episodic structures he encountered in *The Thousand and One Nights* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Lindfors 323). Tchibamba's work pioneers a similar syncretic method.

According to some theorists, intertextuality is fundamental to literary creation. Kristeva sees intertextuality as so central that "each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (66). Barthes declares that every text is a "tissue of quotations, drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (148). In a postcolonial context, this begs the question: where are those "centres of culture," and who has access to them? Colonial and postcolonial intertextuality are the subjects of extensive theoretical commentary. In the context of Anglophone Indian literature, hierarchical notions of European "influence" (Trivedi 124) on colonized authors have given way to literary critical debates about "intertextuality" and postcolonial "hybridity," which are "less hierarchical and more enabling" (131). Analyzing the colonial-era appropriation of European texts by indigenous authors, Elleke Boehmer argues that "imitation" became not an act of simple copying, but an act of original creation, resulting in "something subtly but distinctly new." She views such "imitation" as presenting the colonizer with a "distorted image of his world" (163). Presenting an alternative world-view is certainly one of Tchibamba's objectives, but the perspective in *Ngando* is not a "distorted" one; it is a Congolese viewpoint, presented to colonial officials in a French-language novella. Reshaping the boundaries of the novel enables original acts of colonial-era literary creation, for Boehmer: manipulating inherited

forms such as the novel, and combining them with their own conceptual structures, empowered colonized authors to “create imaginative spaces beyond the ambit of European definitions” (165). While the creation of alternative imaginative spaces is an important part of Tchibamba’s project, it is more nuanced than this. He appropriates, and responds to, Verne’s work in order to develop these alternative imaginary spaces.

Indeed, *Ngando* is striking because it also displays intertextual features that Boehmer and other critics usually associate with postcolonial literature, despite the fact that it was published twelve years before the Congo gained independence. Boehmer does not mention that this level of syncretism existed before decolonization:

post-independence writers relied on an intensely practical hybridity – the blending of their different cultural influences, an upfront and active syncretism – to unsettle the inheritance of Europe. (194)

In the case of Anglophone authors, she argues:

For the once-colonized to interpret Homer or Shakespeare or Dante on their own terms meant staking a claim to European tradition from beyond its conventional boundaries. Take-over or appropriation was in its way a bold refusal of cultural dependency. It signified that the powerful paradigms represented by Europe’s canonical texts were now mobilized in defence of what had once been seen as secondary, unorthodox, defiant, primitive. (195)

Appropriating European literature is certainly a strategy that Tchibamba employs, but with the difference that he also responds to anticolonial ideologies within Verne’s work. Moreover, Tchibamba sees not only Europe’s narrative structures, but its literary styles, as ripe for reinvention. According to Boehmer, the postcolonial author “flamboyantly crosses, fragments, and parodies different narrative styles,” enriching European language-texts with untranslated words and traditional proverbs (195). The result is what she terms “polyphony” (197), a concept that is eminently applicable to Tchibamba’s work from before and after decolonization. Peter Morey also sees postcolonial intertextuality as vibrantly polyvocal:

Postcolonial intertextuality takes a variety of forms: quotation and allusion; intertexts as structuring frameworks for plot and thematics; the collage type, where juxtaposition of many intertexts creates an effect and thereby generates meaning; and the intertext-as-archive, where a dialogic engagement is conducted between the novel and aspects of a broader cultural discourse – the grand narratives of Science or History – fostered by colonialism. (Morey 84-5)

While Boehmer sees postcolonial authors as unsettling and appropriating European culture, Morey allows for the possibility of a

more allusive and dialogic method. Tchibamba's allusions to Verne contain elements of both approaches.

There has been some earlier critical acknowledgement that Tchibamba was creating a new literary form by adapting the novel to a Congolese context, but it has been sparse. Among critics writing in English, Kasongo Kapanga has devoted the most space to Tchibamba's work. He has argued that "the colonial figure is symbolically expelled from the property on the ground[s] of the revived past and culture" (2008, 39), but then partly contradicts this by arguing that the text is the product of Tchibamba's status as an intellectual "immersed in both the traditional and in the newly created culture heavily influenced by Western education" (2008, 40). His commentary is more nuanced in later writing when he questions whether Tchibamba was using a European form to enhance a traditional tale, or whether he was responding to a European desire for "exotic" narratives:

was the author apprehending new literary forms to enhance a traditional narrative? Or rather was he presenting the narratives to respond to Europe's demands fed by unconcealed exotic intent? (2017, 117)

What Tchibamba does in *Ngando* is to create a narrative that is somewhere between the two; a hybrid text that retells a precolonial legend by adapting the European form of the novel. Although he is writing for a Belgian colonial audience, Tchibamba certainly includes realistic descriptions of horrendous colonial brutality in his novella. And yet, his reading of nineteenth-century western science fiction informs the way he narrates traditional tales of magical realms beyond the colonial city.

Tchibamba discussed his predilection for the fantastical tales of Verne and Edgar Allen Poe, and other Congolese scholars have commented on his reading of these authors. Kadima-Nzuji notes that during his time studying at a seminary, "[h]e discover[ed] Jules Verne, and appreciat[ed] his journeys both to the centre of the earth and around it" (1984, 226).⁷ Tchibamba himself noted that "[a]t secondary school, my favorite was Jules Verne" (1948, 16).⁸ He was also responsive to the work of Joseph Conrad, although not necessarily in the uncomplicatedly combative way that Gehrman suggests (2009). Conrad's famous river-journey into the interior in *Heart of Darkness* provides a narrative structure for Tchibamba's 1981 novella *Ngemena* (Reddick). In view of Tchibamba's appreciation of Verne, the intertextual links between the Congolese novelist and the French writer are explored more fully in this article.

Ngando retells a traditional Mongo legend (Kapanga 2009, 36), but Tchibamba adapts the tale by setting it during the early days of

colonization. Gaston D. Périer, Secretary of the Commission for the Protection of Indigenous Arts and Jobs and Chair of the judging panel that awarded Tchibamba the prize, called Tchibamba “a man with black skin, already educated by our [Western] civilization, but retaining a respect for his own culture” (preface to *Ngando*, 1949, 13).⁹ This is, of course, the judgement of a colonial official. While the idea of Tchibamba’s merely ‘respecting’ his own culture does not capture the way he vindicates it, Périer articulates the dualities which Tchibamba faced as he embarked on his literary career. Set in a Kinshasa shaped by colonial incursions, *Ngando* straddles the border between the dynamic, fluid world of traditional orature and the print culture of the European novel; between passing on legends, writing for a colonial judging panel, and defying colonial authority.

The early critical reception of *Ngando* has influenced subsequent literary critical commentary. Tchibamba received reviews of his book from Belgium, which completely missed the book’s syncretism. Here are his recollections of the reviews of his novella that arrived from Belgium:

From Louvain, I received cuttings from the newspapers Le Soir and La Libre Belgique where the tone was negative : ‘Look, we’re training some individuals to become priests, and they aren’t succeeding [...] They’re now writing about the realm of superstition, which is precisely what we’ve fought against and which is the origin of subversive ideas; this is a danger for the future of our colony ...’ (Tchibamba and Lomomba 1985 14)¹⁰

There is no doubt that Tchibamba’s first novella contains subversive aspects. Yet after such a reception in the metropole, it is unsurprising that so few literary critics have discussed Tchibamba’s dialogue with European authors. Tchibamba would have had to renounce ‘superstition’ in the form of “witchcraft” and ‘the cult of ancestors’ to acquire the benefits of a Civic Merit Card in the colonial Congo (Kapanga 2017, 106) – or at least, he would have had to *appear* to renounce them. *Ngando*’s status as a hybrid text that plays with the generic conventions of the novella, orature, magical realism and science fiction, however, indicates that Tchibamba celebrates the ‘cult of the ancestors’ while reworking European literary forms. The well-known Congolese writer and theorist Valentin Mudimbe has deconstructed ‘the opposition between the written and the oral’ (96). He stresses that in modern African countries, “scientific discourse and praxis can well coexist with myths” (97). The function of myths in contemporary Central Africa, for Mudimbe, is to remind people of their origins and of the need for adaptation to reflect present realities (98). Historically, myths were communicated via the oral tales on which Tchibamba draws; five years after the publication of *Ngando*,

the author and editor Antoine-Roger Bolamba wrote that African civilization “is condensed in an oral literature that has great richness” (1953, 319).¹¹ In postcolonial times, Kapanga has written:

the use of European and local languages, narrative techniques and strategies does not stand in a conflictual relationship, but it invites the two elements to play a complementary role in the (re-)creation of narratives. This resulting literary crafting constitutes [postcolonial authors’] way of transcending the binary colonial condition in favour of a multi-faceted reality that nationhood urges and requires under postcolonial conditions. (2017, 183)

He has applied such syncretic theories to the recent author Kama Kamanda (1952-), but Tchibamba’s work also needs to be viewed as containing such nuances.

It may develop a European literary form and borrow literary devices from Verne, but there is no doubt that *Ngando* is trenchantly critical of colonial exploitation. Tchibamba uses his novella to confront white officials like Périer with the hardships inflicted by the colonial regime. In the book, Congolese people are subjected to food shortages (37), beatings (47) and are even led around on leads for the “crime” of being “jobless” (46).¹² The details of colonial intransigence in the novel are drawn from Tchibamba’s own experiences. On publishing an article on the status of educated Congolese people in 1946—“What will our place be in tomorrow’s world?”¹³—he remembers being told that his life was in danger and receiving a brutal flogging, because his writing was judged to be subversive. He would bear the scars of his flogging for the next forty years (Tchibamba and Lomomba 1985, 40), and the experience would continue to mark his fiction. Nevertheless, this very article had articulated the difficult position between Europeanization and precolonial tradition in which the Congolese educated class found itself having to navigate. Tchibamba wrote:

Torn between the indigenous customs and mentality on the one hand, which are labelled as ‘primitive,’ and Europeanization on the other, we don’t actually know where to turn. (qtd in Kadima-Nzuji 52)¹⁴

Here, Tchibamba quite clearly evokes a conflicted dual position, between his European literary education and the Congolese traditions to which he was loyal. Such dualities are present in *Ngando*, in Tchibamba’s juxtaposition of words from Verne’s vocabulary with Lingala words, and in the novel’s use of science fiction terms to create a form of Congolese magical realism.

The novella alternates between magical realism with historical realism. Riva, Kadima-Nzuji, and others have interpreted the novel as reconstructing beliefs that were being eroded by colonial culture, but their interpretation does not show how Tchibamba uses magical

realism strategically. Upstone suggests that “postcolonial writers have been increasingly drawn to magical-realism as an effective genre in which to develop colonial critique.” She relates this to the movement from anticolonial nationalism to independence (2009, 20). It is precisely by using magical realism that Tchibamba envisages sites of anticolonial escape, resistance or subversion: he is not simply preserving a belief in the supernatural that is in danger of disappearing. These sites of escape have important ideological implications: Tchibamba envisages a submerged Congolese culture that operates out of sight of the colonial power. In his preface, he evokes “le fond purement indigène,” (the purely indigenous [cultural] core) – but *fond* is also the term he uses for the riverbed. However, in order to base his novella on this mythical *fond*, Tchibamba appropriates the European novel by transforming it. Intertextual references to Verne occur from the very first page.

In his first sentence, Tchibamba adapts the discourse of European science and science fiction. The vocabulary he uses, from biological terms to the language of submarines, is a response to Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*:

Who doesn’t know about that reptile with webbed feet and a heavy body covered in rock-hard scales? That gigantic lizard, which can live with ease on both land and water? Ngando, or rather – the crocodile, that malevolent animal always ready to devote itself to the struggle of man against man, to become a ‘submarine’ vehicle to those who have recourse to its murderous services. (Tchibamba 1982, 21)¹⁵

Tchibamba initially uses the word “reptile” (“saurien”) instead of the subgroup term “lizard,” borrowing the discourse of a learned natural historian in the first part of the opening sentence. He then uses the significant words “submarine vehicle.” There can be no other source than Verne for this turn of phrase: the earlier author uses *véhicule* of oceangoing craft (e.g. 131) and “bateau ‘sous-marin’” (24) with the same quotation marks that Tchibamba later employs. In French, *véhicule* can be applied to wheeled vehicles, to media of transmission such as languages, and to the animal “vehicles” on which Hindu gods travel (Larousse). It is indeed unusual to see the word applied to an animal outside the context of Hinduism. Even Tchibamba’s lengthy opening sentence, with its litany of phrases, reflects the rhythms of nineteenth-century prose. Tchibamba has several reasons for employing Verne’s vocabulary. The allusion to a canonical European author whom he admires might have pleased the European judges of the writing competition, and they were necessary for him to stand a chance of having his book published. His strategy, however, shares some common ground with the intertextual polyphony that Boehmer views as a subversive reworking of European literature. Significantly,

Tchibamba is entering into dialogue with European scientific discourse, as Morey has suggested. He does so by switching from a linguistic register inspired by Verne to a mixture of Latinate and Lingala terms. This can be seen in a passage early in the novel, in which Tchibamba explains how sorcerers were believed to possess crocodiles:

Medicine-menandndoki [sorcerers] in particular are the usual masters of ngando. They enter their carcasses and are transported under the water to distant places, in order to abduct somebody, and are carried back with their human spoils. (21)¹⁶

The tone here is still erudite: the original French *localité* is more formal than the more common *lieu*; *ravir* is literary, while *butin humain* is a metaphor that frames human beings as loot or spoils of war. The linguistic register of this excerpt is far more elevated than the more matter-of-fact tone of a nearly contemporaneous article by author and editor Antoine-Roger Bolamba, who uses the familiar term *le croco* ('the croc') when describing this form of sorcery (2009, 29). Yet both *ngando* and *ndoki* are Lingala terms, which Tchibamba juxtaposes with his learned vocabulary derived from the Classics. This is a polyphonic text, mixing European and Congolese linguistic registers. Earlier critics have usually associated hybrid linguistic strategies with literature from after decolonization. Whether writing about natural history or magic, Tchibamba brings together the ideas and formal literary tone of early science fiction with vernacular words and beliefs, to subvert and reinvent European science fiction.

Verne was not only important to Tchibamba because of his use of the fantastical; the French author's descriptions of underwater journeys also helped Tchibamba to shape his prose. When describing how Musolinga is dragged into the watery realm below the surface of the River Congo, Tchibamba references Verne's descriptions of miraculous underwater worlds. Verne's Captain Nemo invites Aronnax to go hunting in the forests of the Isle of Crespo (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* 155-171), but he does not initially specify that everything from the forest to the "walk on the plain" (155)¹⁷ is under water. Similarly, the water-spirits transport Musolinga to a magical realist realm that responds to Verne's world of undersea marvels:

They had gathered then in a sort of garden where the ornamental shrubs were reptiles with webbed feet, standing on their hind feet and their tail; their forefeet, spread out in the shape of crosses, supported a multitude of very small fish diversely coloured, assembled geometrically around the webbed feet of those reptiles. The lawn was composed of countless tiny worms whose colours encompassed all arrays of greenery. (64-5)¹⁸

Here, Verne's writing provides an intertext for Tchibamba:

Then we passed through a field of pelagic seaweed plants not yet torn away by the water and which were growing vigorously. These lawns of fine-woven material were soft under our feet and could be compared to the silkiest rugs composed by man's hand. But just as the greenery stretched before our feet, our heads were also catered for. (Verne trans. Butcher 110)¹⁹

The luxuriant vegetation that Verne creates is replaced by a magical underwater animal kingdom in Tchibamba's work, but the word *verdure* is taken from Verne. Responding to Verne's novel allows Tchibamba to develop his magical realism by adding scientific details and specific information from natural history. Verne's inventive idea that fibres from molluscs could be used to weave diving suits (*Vingt mille lieues*, 145) is echoed by Tchibamba's description of leeches being used to sew Musolinga's eyes and mouth closed:

The ngando [crocodile] blocked Musolinga's nostrils and ears, sewing shut his lips and eyelids, using slimy, elastic leeches. This was to protect the child during the long underwater journey he was taking him on. (62)²⁰

Verne's scientific-sounding description of Nemo's design of the perfect breathing apparatus (152) is replaced with a more magical realist idea by Tchibamba. The water-spirits take Musolinga into the lair of "red snakes, which covered [Musolinga] in their sticky, greenish secretions which had the property of giving a land-dweller the ability to live without difficulty under the water" (Ngando 1982, 63).²¹ As in the novella's opening sentence, Tchibamba creates a refined tone: *sécrétions* is a scientific term, while *terrien* has the highly specific meaning of "land-dwelling" as opposed to "marine" here. Tchibamba even calls the bottom of the river *le fond abyssal* – a turn of phrase used of the sea bed (Larousse); Verne favors the related term *abîme*. Untranslated terms from Lingala blend with nineteenth-century metaphors for the "bottomless deep." Tchibamba certainly gives more space in his novella to myth and magical realism than to ideas drawn from science fiction, but intertextual responses to Verne form part of his project to hybridize orature with the European novella. This hybrid form and polyphonic style appropriates Verne's vocabulary and shows colonial readers an image of Africa that challenges Eurocentric prejudices about this supposedly empty *terra nullius*. Yet it also evidences linguistic flair: a strategy that goes beyond appropriation, suggesting literary dialogue.

In his 1974 novella, Tchibamba returns to mythical realms below the River Congo's surface and appropriates Verne's writing as an intertext to inform his linguistic registers. By the time Tchibamba published *Légende de Londema ...*, profound political transformations had taken place. The struggle for independence prevailed in 1960, but it was followed by major upheavals dubbed the *Crise congolaise*.

These included the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, with CIA complicity (Yervasi 37-8), and the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's coup in 1965 (Appama 41). Analyzing novels by Valentin Mudimbe, Pius Nganda Nkashama and Georges Ngal, which are contemporaneous with *Légende*, Kapanga argues that the novels' outlook was shaped by the "emancipatory mindset of the 1960s" and later scepticism about Mobutu's policies (2017, 198). The Mobutu dictatorship was not the only political issue provoking sceptical responses from writers: decolonization did not signal the end of western interference in Central African affairs. In his 1981 novella *Ngemena*, Tchibamba lamented that colonialism had given way to *néo-colonialisme*, which benefited the Congolese nouveaux riches (1981, 8). Though *Légende ...* is not set during his own lifetime, Tchibamba was publishing throughout the time of the dictatorship. *Légende ...* deals with a precolonial conflict between different Congolese groups and ends with the arrival of European colonists. There is no doubt that *Légende ...* turns traditional oral tales into literature, mocks the Belgian regime, and parodies Western science. Yet, Verne's fantastical stories of journeying into the depths of the sea provide some of the vocabulary, tone and specific details that Tchibamba appropriates and transforms. Moreover, if the backbone of Tchibamba's plot comes from a traditional legend, Verne's character Captain Nemo provides a literary antecedent for its anticolonial ideology.

The novella begins in a historical mode and progresses in a magical realist vein, when the princess Londema and her brother are transported beneath the waters of the River Congo to King Konkobela's utopian realm. This fictional paradise has banished "death, suffering" (210).²² Significantly, Tchibamba describes Konkobela's kingdom as protected from white people and their influence (211). The narrative is indisputably an anticolonial tale that adapts an Anziziu legend, but the vocabulary and imagery that Tchibamba uses to tell it create an intertextual dialogue with Verne. Here, the allusions to Verne are more extensive than the occasional responses found in *Ngando*. Tchibamba uses his description of the Congo River's reedy marshes at Mbamou Island as a political allegory of the predatory world of colonization, but the language that he uses also responds to Verne's predilection for scientific vocabulary:

Between the north-eastern side of Mbamou Island and the marshy edges of the right bank of the River Zaïre, there stretched an aquatic meadow embellished with emerald, set in a clay lagoon. A true feast for the eyes, this place attracted the gaze with the exuberance of thick vegetation sustained by the colony of a species of grass which botanists, in their esoteric jargon, name *echinocloa stagnina*, resembling small sugar canes. The 'people of the water' call them mikoko. And according to them, it is to these mikoko that the malangwa, mboto, mabundu, mayanga,

captainfish ... owe the delicious taste of their flesh, for they consume significant quantities of them. The tufted expanse of these mikoko also serves as a refuge for almost all the types of lungfish and rayfins forming part of the ichthyological fauna that dwells in the silty sediments of the marshes. (Tchibamba 1982, 163)²³

The underwater *plaine* of the Isle of Crespo on which Captain Nemo and Aronnax go hunting (*Vingt mille lieues*, 155-171) informs Tchibamba's *prairie aquatique*; also the *vase visqueuse* (161) that Verne describes is paralleled by Tchibamba's *sédiments vaseux*. Verne, too, comments on the exquisite flavour of fish that feed on underwater plants (Verne trans. Butcher 230). Tchibamba completes the picture of the marsh's ecosystem with a description of the 'mbénga' (tigerfish) that prey on these "herbivorous vertebrates" (*vertébrés herbivores*) and "a varied range of saurians, and even reptiles" (*une gamme hétéroclite de sauriens, et même de reptiles*) (*Legend of Londema* 164).

In Verne's work, Tchibamba was able to read what he terms the "esoteric jargon" of botanists and naturalists. The passengers of the *Nautilus* learn about the classification of fish into scientific orders such as "subbrachials" and "apodals" (Verne 141).²⁴ They also identify "various triggerfishes, jumping scombroids, wolf-unicorns" (Verne 235),²⁵ by their common names. The key difference between Verne's scientific jargon and Tchibamba's linguistic register, however, is that Tchibamba also uses Congolese names for plants and fish. At first, Tchibamba italicizes terms in Congolese languages, Latin, and occasionally French. However, "mikoko" appears without italics the second time it is mentioned. Thus, Tchibamba develops a polyphonic register that naturalizes local vocabulary; however, his italicization of terms in French and Latin defamiliarizes the languages of European scientific classification and colonial literary production. Hybridized, parodic and subversive, Tchibamba's stylistic method calls the "esoteric jargon" of western science into question.

Yet if Tchibamba adapts western natural history at the beginning of the novella, he develops the narrative by using similar registers with satirical intent. The image of one culture engulfing another recurs in the work of (post)colonial authors: Swift's satirical *A Modest Proposal* suggested devouring infants as a means of alleviating Irish poverty, while Conrad's Kurtz opens his mouth "as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth" (Conrad 74). As will be mentioned shortly, one of Verne's anticolonial characters uses the term 'devouring.' Tchibamba deploys images of devouring and predation to create a damning criticism of European colonialism:

The amphibious people of the tribe of carnivores do indeed proliferate in this pond, where they only stop the slaughter when replete. But the hostilities and butchery begin again each day, as it is true that in order to

live, and especially in order to live well, selfishness at the expense of others' lives is the golden rule in the behaviour of expatriate dwellers of the animal kingdom. Even among pretentious 'reasonable animals,' the ferocity of their selfishness is the foundation of their essential ideal as well as a guarantee of their interests, because with them, 'well-ordered charity begins with oneself' is translated into destruction of sensitivity and the dominance of hard-heartedness, each one thinking himself the centre of the universe (1982, 164).²⁶

Tchibamba's writing creates a double meaning; *ressortissant* is usually applied to foreign nationals living abroad. He uses the metaphor of an aquatic feeding frenzy to take aim at the Belgian 'expatriates' he encountered before independence. The word *hostilités* evokes warfare, rather than the survival instinct, and he again deploys the vocabulary of political tensions. When he satirizes pretentious "reasonable animals," he is targeting the very people whose scientific 'reason' he will attack in the final section of the novella.

This state of mutual predation is applied to the struggles of a local chief with the Maluku, Kwa and Kimpoko boatmen who come to compete for fish in the *colonie* (165) of reeds: a battle over natural resources that recalls the imperialist land-grab that led to the establishment of the Congo Free State. Tchibamba makes a point of using the word *colonie* more than once in the space of a few pages; and he stresses this politically resonant term. Having studied at a seminary in his youth, Tchibamba exposes the hypocrisy of those who preached Christian values during colonial times by quoting a European proverb: "[L]a charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même" is the French proverb in its entirety. The idea of charity beginning with oneself and leading to hard-heartedness is a stark contrast with the altruistic Christian ideals he would have learned in the seminary. In the paragraph above, a polyphonic register creates a trenchantly ironic parody of the discourse of colonial religious institutions and European natural history. This passage is far more combative than dialogic; here, Tchibamba's appropriation of colonial language displays its full subversive potential.

Nevertheless, Tchibamba's engagement with European intertexts also encompasses an ideological dialogue with Verne's fictional creations. Verne's Captain Nemo is a character created by a European author, on which Tchibamba draws to inform his anticolonial reworking of Congolese legends. In *Vingt mille lieues ...*, Nemo's nationality is kept secret, but his ideas clearly evoke a desire for independence. One of Nemo's speeches about the freedom provided by living beneath the sea is echoed by Tchibamba's fantasy of a land beneath the river, where complete independence and liberty prevail. Nemo says:

The sea does not belong to despots. On its surface, immoral rights can still be claimed, men can fight each other, devour each other, and carry out all the earth's atrocities. But thirty feet below the surface, their power ceases, their influence fades, their authority disappears. Ah, sir, live, live in the heart of the sea! Independence is possible only here! Here I recognize no master! (Verne 101-2)²⁷

In Verne's sequel *L'Île mystérieuse*, Tchibamba would have found out that Nemo was an exiled Indian prince; his entire family massacred by the British after the crushing of the Sepoy mutiny. Just as the sea is a free realm for Verne, the underwater reaches of the Congo River are associated with freedom in several of Tchibamba's books. In *Ngando*, Musolinga says "Vive la liberté!" (Tchibamba 1982, 45) when he swims in the river in the wake of the ferry *Congolia*. He celebrates being away from the oppressive discipline of the colonial school system, but this cry for freedom also echoes Tchibamba's desire for Congolese independence. The idea of the river as a site of liberation becomes more explicit in *Légende*: "men white as ghosts [...] will take the country" (Tchibamba 1982, 210).²⁸ In order to protect the people and creatures under the river, "[t]he city of Konkobela will be transported beneath the river. And the river will rise, rise ... until it becomes a great lake" (*Legend of Londema* 210).²⁹ In this novella, it is mainly European colonists who bring "suffering, worries, misfortunes"³⁰ (210-211) though Tchibamba also hints at the problems of continuing western involvement in Congolese politics. Immediately after Congolese independence, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated with American and Belgian complicity (Yervasi 38). In later writing, Tchibamba would explicitly target "néo-colonialisme" (1981, 8). Here, his novella enters into an ideological dialogue with Verne that is more positive than appropriative.

Even if Tchibamba admires Verne and borrows from his linguistic register, *Légende* offers critical responses to the processes of western exploration. These are the very scientific expeditions that Verne's writing celebrates. One of Tchibamba's most significant replies to Verne's voyage under the sea is his ironic presentation of the European exploration of the River Congo:

When the white men came, this vast expanse of water intrigued them and they wanted to see and know what it concealed. So, they put on diving suits, dived into the lake, and explored it. Do you know what they found, those unbelievers? Rocks, silt, sand, a few sparse, grass-like aquatic plants that the fish feed on. Of Konkobela's city, not a trace, let alone remains. Therefore, Malébo lake has neither a past nor a history to them: it has always been as it is when "discovered," or at best it is only a basin whose bottom is made of schist deposits, covered with strata of clay, pebbles and diverse psammitic materials. Yet, the bottom of the lake explored, once the composition of its material of sandstone construction is analyzed and classified, constitutes precisely the ceiling which, underneath, forms the sky of the ancient city of Konkobela. (*Legend of Londema* 214)³¹

Tchibamba rejects a baldly scientific, Western understanding of natural phenomena, and corrects a European image of the Congo as ahistorical. Here, he also parodies Verne: *Vingt mille lieues* imagines an early version of a freestanding diving-suit. Tchibamba's scientific vocabulary becomes yet more elevated as his tone becomes parodic: a word such as *psammitiques* instead of the more usual *sablonneux* or *sableux* mocks obscure scientific discourse. This is by no means the only instance where Tchibamba takes aim at scientific language and methods in his fiction.³² Here, Tchibamba offers a critique of Western scientific enquiry and highlights the importance of Congolese ways of understanding natural phenomena, as he had in the preface to *Ngando* (15). This strategy corresponds to Morey's view of the postcolonial "intertext-as-archive": a revision of European scientific grand narratives. Writing from a Central African country that was subject to Western interference even after its independence, Tchibamba offers a very different perspective on the River Congo from the picture created by colonial explorers. If African authors of the colonial era had worked to "create imaginative spaces" beyond European concepts (Boehmer 165), Tchibamba continued this project to mock and subvert western scientific narratives, which remained hegemonic even after independence.

In conclusion, Tchibamba's two novellas about the *fond abyssal* at the bottom of the River Congo develop subtly different intertextual strategies. Even if his preface to *Ngando* sets out to capture a Congolese world-view, Tchibamba's juxtaposition of Lingala words with vocabulary taken from Verne's interest in natural history results in a hybrid text. In his first novella, Tchibamba borrows some of Verne's vocabulary to highlight the literary merit of his work to the colonial officials who judged the writing competition. The narrative trajectory of the journey below the surface of the River Congo also constitutes a dialogue with Verne's undersea realms, and his response to Verne is at its most positive at this stage. Nevertheless, the realistic sections of *Ngando* also take criticisms of oppressive colonial practices to the heart of the metropole. Belgian readers were confronted with the regime's erosion of traditional ways of life, its rigid laws, and its dismissal of Congolese culture and perspectives. *Ngando* evokes magical Congolese realms beneath the river's surface in order to subvert and transform western scientific grand narratives. It is significant that Tchibamba developed his polyphonic register and syncretic literary form before decolonization, and his first novella displays features that are more commonly seen as 'postcolonial.' By the time Tchibamba returned to Verne as a European intertext, Mobutu had seized power; the dictator's drive for *authenticité* was reflected in

Tchibamba's turn to historical subjects from the more distant precolonial past in novellas such as *Légende*. In *Légende*, Tchibamba draws on anticolonial strains in Verne's work to envisage a liberated realm below the River Congo's surface. In the later novella, he is able to be more overtly critical of colonialism and new forms of Western neo-imperialism. By this time, his response to Western science is to mock it overtly, and Verne becomes the subject of parody. Yet Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island* remain important: they help Tchibamba evoke underwater realms, and in Captain Nemo, Tchibamba finds an anticolonial figure created by a European author. Although he does parody and criticize Western scientific practice and 'reason' in *Légende*, Verne's criticisms of 'devouring' warfare and anticolonial resistance provide a canonical European model that Tchibamba reworks. By creating imaginative spaces under the River Congo that go beyond western (neo)-imperialist understanding, Tchibamba challenges Western-centered scientific paradigms, and subverts, hybridizes and develops the European novel. What Tchibamba pioneers is an entirely new francophone literary form: a hybrid, Congolese magical realism.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Prof. Kasongo Kapanga for his advice about this article, and Rachel Gnagniko for advice about translations from Central African French.

Notes

1. "la cible principale des attaques de Tchibambathe." All translations from French are the author's unless otherwise specified.

2. "le fond purement indigène."

3. "nous, les Noirs du Centre africain, les Bantu, concevons l'Univers"

4. "défense et illustration des valeurs de la civilisation noire"

5. "Le roman-conte *Ngando* de Tchibamba met à jour le rôle du surnaturel dans la vie quotidienne de l'Africain, qui se trouve constamment tiraillé entre la réalité des choses et ses croyances ancestrales des mythes, du merveilleux et de l'horrible."

6. “le désir de reconstruire, au moins au niveau de la fiction, une conception du monde risquant de disparaître et, dans le même temps, de réhabiliter la ‘mentalité des noirs’ si souvent bafouée”

7. “il découvre Jules Verne dont il apprécie les voyages imaginaires au centre comme autour de la terre.”

8. “Au collège, ma préférence était pour Jules Verne.”

9. “un homme à peau noire, déjà instruit de notre civilisation [occidentale], mais conservant le respect de sa propre culture.”

10. “De Louvain, je reçois des coupures des journaux « Le Soir » et « La Libre Belgique » où le ton était mauvais: « Voilà, nous formons des éléments pour devenir prêtres, qui ne réussissent pas, [...] voilà qu’ils travaillent maintenant dans le domaine superstitieux, justement, le domaine que nous avons combattu et qui est à l’origine des idées subversives, qui est un danger pour l’avenir de notre colonie...”

11. “est condensée dans une littérature orale qui est d’une grande richesse.”

12. “sans travail.”

13. “Quelle sera notre place dans le monde de demain?”

14. “Ballottés entre, d’une part, les mœurs et la mentalité des indigènes qualifiés de primitifs et, d’autre part, l’européanisme, nous ne savons au juste à quel saint nous vouer.”

15. “Qui ne le connaît, ce saurien aux pattes palmées, au corps lourd et couvert d’écailles aussi dures que le roc; ce gigantesque lézard, vivant aisément aussi bien sur terre que sous l’eau, *ngando* enfin, le crocodile, animal malfaisant qui se prête toujours au seul service de l’homme contre l’homme, en servant de véhicule « sous-marin » à ceux qui ont recours à ses offices homicides.”

16. “Les féticheurs et les *ndoki* tout particulièrement sont les usagers familiers de *ngando*. Ils entrent dans sa carcasse et se font transporter sous l’eau dans des localités éloignées pour ravir quelqu’un, et se font ramener avec leur butin humain.”

17. “promenade en plaine.”

18. “Ils s’étaient réunis à ce moment-là dans une espèce de jardin dont les arbustes ornementaux étaient des reptiles à pattes palmées se dressant sur leurs pattes de derrière et leur queue; les pattes antérieures, étendues en forme de croix, soutenaient une multitude de très petits poissons diversement colorés, assemblés géométriquement

autour des pattes palmées de ces reptiles. La pelouse était composée d'innombrables petits vers aux couleurs embrassant toutes les gammes de la verdure.”

19. “Puis, nous parcourûmes une prairie d’algues, plantes pélagiennes que les eaux n’avaient pas encore arrachées, et dont la végétation était fougueuse. Ces pelouses à tissu serré, douces au pied, eussent rivalisé avec les plus moelleux tapis tissés par la main des hommes. Mais, en même temps que la verdure s’étalait sous nos pas, elle n’abandonnait pas nos têtes.” (Verne trans. Butcher 110)

20. “[L]e *ngando* [...] boucha les narines et les oreilles, cousut les lèvres et les paupières de Musolinga, à l’aide de sangsues visqueuses et élastiques. Cela, pour protéger l’enfant pendant la longue course qui’il lui ferait faire sous l’eau.”

21. “serpents rouges, lesquels l’enduisirent de leurs sécrétions gluantes et verdâtres qui avaient la propriété de donner au terrien la faculté de vivre sans gêne sous l’eau.”

22. “la mort, les souffrances.”

23. “Entre le côté nord-est de l’île Mbamou et les abords marécageux de la rive droite du fleuve Zaïre, s’étalait une prairie aquatique parée d’émeraude sertie dans une lagune argileuse. Vraie fête pour la vue, cet endroit attirait les yeux par l’exubérance d’une verdure intense entretenue par la colonie d’une espèce d’herbes que les botanistes, dans leur jargon ésotérique, nomment *echinocloa stagnina*, semblables aux cannes à sucre de petites dimensions. Les “gens d’eau” les appellent *mikoko*. Et selon eux, c’est à ces mikoko que les poissons *malangwa*, *mboto*, *mabundu*, *mayanga*, *capitaines* ... doivent le goût savoureux de leur chair, car ils en font une large consommation. L’étalement touffu de ces mikoko sert aussi de refuge à presque tous les types de dipneustes et de téléostéens faisant partie de la faune ichtyologique qui gîte dans les sédiments vaseux des marais.”

24. “subrachiens et apodes.” (Verne trans. Butcher 95)

25. “des balistes variés, des scomberoïdes-sauteurs, des nasons-loups” (Verne trans. Butcher 165)

26. “Le peuple amphibien de la tribu des carnivores pullule en effet dans cet étang où il n’arrête le carnage qu’une fois repu. Mais les hostilités et la boucherie recommencent chaque jour, tant il est vrai que pour vivre, surtout pour bien vivre, l’égoïsme, aux dépens de la vie des autres, est la règle d’or dans le comportement des ressortissants du règne animal. Même chez les prétentieux ‘animaux raisonnables,’ la

féroçité de leur égoïsme est le socle même de leur idéal vital aussi bien que la garantie de leurs intérêts, puisque chez eux “ la charité bien ordonnée...” se traduit par la destruction de la sensibilité et le règne de la dureté de cœur, chacun se prenant pour le centre de l’univers.”

27. “La mer n’appartient pas aux despotes. À sa surface, ils peuvent encore exercer des droits iniques, s’y battre, s’y dévorer, y transporter toutes les horreurs terrestres. Mais à trente pieds au-dessous de son niveau, leur pouvoir cesse, leur influence s’éteint, leur puissance disparaît! Ah! monsieur, vivez, vivez au sein des mers! Là seulement est l’indépendance! Là je ne connais pas de maîtres!” (Verne trans. Butcher 68-9)

28. “des hommes blancs comme fantômes [...] prendront le pays.”

29. “la cité de Konkobela sera transférée sous le fleuve. Et le fleuve gonflera, gonflera... jusqu’à devenir un grand lac.”

30. “les souffrances, les soucis, les infortunes.”

31. “Quand vinrent les hommes blancs, cette vaste expansion d’eau les intrigua et ils voulurent voir et connaître ce qu’elle recelait. Alors, ils se vêtirent de scaphandre, descendirent sous le lac et l’explorèrent. Savez-vous ce qu’ils découvrirent, ces païens? Des roches, du limon, du sable, quelques maigres plantes aquatiques sous forme d’herbes dont se nourrissent les poissons. De la cité de Konkobela, point de traces, encore moins de vestiges. Pour eux donc le lac Malébo n’a ni passé ni histoire: il a toujours été tel qu’il est “ découvert”, tout au plus n’est-il qu’une cuvette dont le fond est fait de sédiments schisteux, recouverts de strates argileuses, de galets et de divers matériaux psammitiques. Or, le fond lacustre exploré, une fois la composition de son matériel de construction gréseux analysé et classé, constitue précisément le plafond qui, en dessous, forme le ciel de la cité antique de Konkobela.”

32. In a novella published three years before *Légende, La Récompense de la cruauté*, Tchibamba presents Western science as not merely misguided, but downright cruel. He shows a supernatural reptile with a human head that cannot be classified according to Western demonology, palaeontology or zoology (Tchibamba 1971, 21, 27). A Western-led “expeditionary corps” kills this animal despite their own “charte internationale relative à la conservation et à la protection de la nature et de la faune, particulièrement en ce qui concerne des animaux rares” (36) (“international charter relating to the conservation and protection of nature and fauna, particularly relating to rare

animals”), and end up turned to stone, “Fossilisés” (40) like their own specimens.

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