

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

(e) *Aetiological myths*

This is the type of tale which sets out to explain the origin of cultural traits and natural features without bringing in religious factors. It can be divided into four sub-types: local legends, tales about natural phenomena, popular etymologies, and tales about cultural traits.

A great deal is known about local legends through European folklore studies.²⁹ Local legends supply an explanation for some particular feature of the landscape. A Kuba example is provided by the explanation given for a circular depression in the treeless plain of Iyool, which is said to be the place where, at the end of hostilities over a struggle for the throne, people danced with such exuberance that the ground sank beneath their feet. The place where the drums were placed is still pointed out to this day.

In contrast to local legends, tales concerning natural phenomena are not regarded as historical. An example is the story of the dog who discovered the sun. The sun, furious at having his hiding-place uncovered, said: 'None of those who looked for me could find me. You alone have found me. That is why you will henceforth always be a thief.' Many Aesop's fables belong to this sub-type.

Popular etymologies are also familiar in European folklore. A Kuba example concerns the name of a village called Bulek. A certain king had suppressed a revolt in the village, which he then gave the name of *bulek*, 'the act of overcoming', based on the saying: the king has overcome all the villages.

Tales about cultural traits deal with the origins of institutions, customs, etc. Several Tetela genealogies show Oluba and Okuba as being the brothers of the ancestors of several Tetela lineages. The Luba and the Kuba are descended from them, and an explanation is thus provided for these tribes being neighbours of the Tetela.³⁰

Aetiological interpretations also occur in other types of source, particularly in tales of artistic merit.

Baumann has aptly remarked that aetiological myths are the sources best suited for providing accurate information about cultural history.³¹ They do indeed often contain memories of features that no longer exist. They are indispensable for studying the history of the cosmological concepts of a people. Unfortun-