

EXTENDED GESTATION AND MIRACULOUS BIRTH IN *IBONIA*, THE EPIC OF MADAGASCAR

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Abstract

Oral literatures from many parts of the world have been enriching the literary tradition with recent transcriptions and translation. African epics have attracted scholarly attention since the 19th century with the proliferation in Ethnographic studies. Ibonia, the Epic from Madagascar is one of the notable texts recently entering the canon of World Literature. The present brief commentary focuses on discussing the significance of the motifs of long pregnancy and supernatural birth of the hero in Ibonia. Referring to critical approaches and scholarly studies from the mid-20th century to the present, this is a modest attempt to introduce some of the remarkable features in the Ibonia epic.

Keywords: Folktale, Epic, African, Hero, Birth, Pregnancy

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Ibonia, the epic of Madagascar, was orally transmitted until it was written down in 1830. It was translated in 1994 by Lee Haring who had been researching in the Folk Literature of Madagascar from 1975. This significant part of the Madagascar Oral Tradition was later made available to the general readers in 2013 through Haring's revised and extended version : *How to Read a Folktale: The Ibonia Epic from Madagascar* . With a standardized text and some important variables of the tale as well as a critical commentary and notes, Haring's book is today the main source of this very significant text in the world tradition of epics. Based on Haring's study that identifies and enlists the major motifs of this tale, the present discussion is a humble attempt to show the significance of the phenomena of prolonged gestation and miraculous birth in the *Ibonia* Epic.

Motifs of the hero's supernatural birth are extant in the myth/ folklore traditions all over the world. The Aztec tradition has Huitzilopochtli, god of Sun and War, being conceived in the womb of Coatlicue, the Earth goddess when she places in her waistband a ball of feathers that fell from the sky. Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom is described to be taking birth directly from Zeus' head. In the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, Water-Mother, the virgin daughter of air, floats with the child in her womb for seven centuries, unable to give birth. In the *Ibonia* Epic, the conception, gestation , and birth of the hero are some of the noteworthy features. In order to carry this discussion further, it is pertinent to give a very brief synopsis of this epic, so that the reader can grasp the essence of the critical statement about to be made.

Sky Father is visited by his five grandsons (Princes of East, West, North, South, and Center). All of them are welcomed with gun fires and canon fires except the Prince of Centre

for whom the guns and canons are loaded with one single stone fired into the ground. This is because he has no offspring. He and his wife Rasoa (meaning Beautiful-Rich) are sad and begin their quest for childbirth. The Prince is not ready to take another wife. He seeks help from Ranakombe, who has great magical powers. Ranakombe promises that they will have a child and he will be a formidable man. He also tells Rasoa that she will have to carry him in her womb for ten years. Directed by Ranakombe, Rasoa goes to Male Rock of Thousand Corners for getting the childbearing charm in the form of a locust. After facing dangers like water- sprouts, winds, thunderstorm, and hail she gets the locust and carries it to her village- Iliolava. Ranakombe is called for further rituals. At his arrival, the locust breaks away from the hearth and goes to the ridgepole, creating a great fire. It then throws itself into the fire and is cooked. Then the locust jumps out of the fire and perches on Rasoa's head, entering her by piercing her head and settling in her womb to become a child.

After spending three years in the womb the child tells the mother that he has selected a wife, the Girl of Grace (Iampelasoamananoro). He tells the mother to see that she is not stolen by some dangerous man. He declares that he wants no other woman, "If she dies, I will not bury her in the ground, and if she lives, I will not leave her to any man"(Haring 66). His apprehensions prove to be true for he soon tell the mother that his wife-to-be has been abducted by the formidable Stone Man. Nobles are sent in pursuit but they fail to get her. The child, before his birth, boasts of his own greatness. Now as ten years have passed he looks for a proper birthplace. He makes the mother travel all over the world in this process of the selection of birthplace. She travels to rocks, summit of a high place, all the forests, the water and comes back to the village. Finally the baby selects the tie-beam of the house as the auspicious place for his birth. He declares that he would be coming directly through the stomach. A sharp knife put in a banana is swallowed by the mother and the child comes out cutting her stomach, thus killing his mother.

Ranakombe has come to visit the birth and he tells the people to give the baby firewood. After this, the tedious process of choosing the right name starts. The child refuses many names suggested by Ranakombe. He finally accepts the name 'Iboniamasiboniamanoro' (short form -Ibonia), meaning "The One of the Clear Captivating Glance". The child soon gains supernatural powers and brings back his mother, father, and all the people who died at his birth, back to life. His adversary, the Stone Man also becomes aware that some danger to his kingdom has been created. Ibonia has to be given additional names in order to bring strength. Again there is a long duel of words between Ibonia and Ranakombe on the selection of the name. Ranakombe finally adds the name-'Girds His Loins Like Manly Princess'. Ibonia cannot have peace without his wife. He reminds his mother's sister (called Other-Mother) that he has to get back his wife. He arms himself with appropriate weapons- the spear, axe, and knife. He is tested by Ranakombe and gets powerful charms after passing this test.

After coming back to his village, he doesn't enter it but buries himself up to the neck near the entry gate and starts killing people with his spear. As he is a powerful person, nothing can kill him, so the people bring his mother to stop him. She challenges his manhood and sends him to perform a difficult task of killing a voracious crocodile. Ibonia succeeds in killing the crocodile and returns but again repeats the same act of burying near the entry gate and destroying people. The mother then sends him on another task. In this way he is sent to fight the Savage bull, Big Chameleon Man, a water animal devouring the people and animals of a certain village. Each time Ibonia comes, he repeats the same act of troubling people and the mother sends him on a new task. Ibonia refuses to marry other girls; he seeks permission to go for rescuing the Girl of Grace. The permission is finally granted. Ibonia has to encounter the crocodile and the shark to cross the river. He overpowers them and crosses the river using these creatures. Ibonia first goes to Old Man- keeper of Stone Man's fields. After getting all the information about Stone Man, he kills Old man, wears his skin and goes to Stone Man's estate in the disguise of Old Man.

The final section portrays Ibonia's deeds at the Stone man's kingdom. He befriends Girl of Grace who gives him shelter in her house. Ibonia initially defeats Stone Man in various contests. He transforms himself in a kite and later in a cat to find Stone man's talismans. After polluting and destroying the talismans, Ibonia, in the final duel, lifts Stone man like a sledgehammer and buries him deep in the ground. The Royal couple, in their return journey, is aided by supernatural powers. Waters separate automatically to give them way. Ibonia comes back and reigns peacefully. He prescribes the people some necessary rules; declares that he will die after three years and passes away later after three years.

The epic pattern here is clearly discernible. Scholars of African Literature have recognized *Ibonia* as a notable text in the tradition of African epics. Harold Scheub in his article "A Review of the African Oral Traditions and Literature", identifies a distinguishing characteristic that, "The epic of Ibonia thus comes to represent a shift in view regarding traditional rites of passage: the tale character unquestioningly undergoes the rituals, the epic hero alters them and gives their new forms permanence" (10). Scheub further comments on the heroic cycle and differentiates it as an epic because, "Unlike the tale, Ibonia, in his struggles and the movement through the dense forest of praise-names, moves beyond the routine activities of earth-bound humans, and comes to stand for a fresh fulfillment of the rituals, especially of marriage, so that in the end, before his death, he announces his testament" (10). Scheub's analysis shows how Ibonia emerges as a culture hero. As Ibonia is the culture hero/ epic hero, his birth has to be extraordinary. Dean A. Miller points out that, "the extraordinary epiphany of a transhuman hero demands an extraordinary, possibly divine, intervention, and the *contactus* of divine potency generates or explains the superior powers of the hero" (72). Some of the motifs identified by Haring on the basis of Thompson's Motif Index in Ibonia and its variants are: 1) T 591.1 -Magic remedies for barrenness or impotence; 2) T 574-Long pregnancy (instances of 12 months in case of Indian tradition and 7 years in Jewish tradition are given); 3) T 575-Child speaks in mother's womb; 4) T

575.1.6.1- Unborn child directs his mother on journey. These motifs have been taken up for elaboration in the foregoing discussion.

Following the epic pattern *The Prince of the Centre* and *Rasoa* are directed by Ranakombe to procure the charm on the condition that they will have only one child and he will be a disaster child. *Rasoa's* childbearing charm is a kite that finally impregnates her by entering through her head. From here the Long Pregnancy starts. *Rasoa* has to carry the child in her womb for ten years. The child, after three years in the womb chooses the *Girl of Grace* as his wife and declares that he will have no other wife, which is reiterated by him later in the story. The choice of the wife is one important act of the child in the womb. The second important act is his quest for a birthplace which is a cyclical journey. He guides his mother to various places and finally selects his house as the birthplace. In this process, he shows his preferences with reasons: the bare rock is rejected because it is a place for plunderers like kites and eagles; the high summit is a place for ghosts and spirits; the forest is the land of the stealthy; the water has many slippery creatures that he cannot manage. The child finally chooses the house as an auspicious place for his birth. This can be taken as a preference for civilized society as contrasted with wilderness in the preceding quest. Many heroic epics describe the birth of the hero in forest but *Ibonia* chooses civilization; he chooses to be with humans.

The manner of *Ibonia's* birth is also different from that of the epic heroes. He gets a knife, swallowed with a banana by his mother and comes out tearing her stomach, "I will not come out above or below, I will come out through your stomach, mama" (Haring 73). This child is perceived as a disaster; he causes his parents' deaths; but significantly, he also restores them to life as soon as he acquires power. Therefore, the destruction of the parents is a short lived phenomenon. The child, while still in the womb, has a very strong sense of identity. There are long passages wherein he tells his mother who he is, contrasted with who he is not:

I am no tako leaf, floating on water I am no sweet potato top, my own opposite
I am no hog puffing myself up I am no tenrec [hedgehog] rolling myself up
I am no dog with dangerous tongue I am no locust parading myself
I am no hedgehog whose prickles can't prevent death I am no stone that starts rolling
I am no banana one is enough of those I am no fog covering the earth
I am no cock waking in the morning
I am no guinea fowl carrying off my own young I am no crocodile waiting at the ford.
I am an edible arum in the chink of a rock not crushed with the foot
its leaves not eaten.
Pass over it your knees swell up
look at it sideways you lose an eye point at it you lose fingers.
Place it on the flame a calamity cook it a disaster.
But I am a poisonous creeper from beyond the sea pass under it
it blinds you step over it your stomach swells up
leave it there it makes your toes drop off.
I am an enormous crocodile lying in wait at the ford. if a pirogue strikes him
he capsizes it anyone crossing he chews his stomach.
I am a big house seen from afar.
Not even a whole crowd can take it apart but if they do it takes revenge.
And when those from across the sea catch sight of me I add them to my servants.
I am one dangerous lad! (Haring 67-68)

Before Ibonia's birth, it has been prophesized that he will be a dangerous and formidable person. In case of the miraculous births, there are both the possibilities- the child may become a savior, a hero, or a demon. As Joseph Campbell in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* states, "The procreating power is everywhere. And according to the whim or destiny of the hour, either a hero savior or a world-annihilating demon may be conceived—one can never know" (288). In Ibonia's case, the child becomes a saviour, as his later actions in the epic will show. Half a century after Campbell's seminal work, the scholar Clyde W. Ford, in his *The hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* observes regarding the hero's birth that, "The fantastic details ..., are not designed for the eye of reason but rather for the eye of introspection. And the hero's life is not given solely for us to emulate but to use as a meditation on our own" (31). Therefore the hero's miraculous birth is to be seen symbolically as the potential within us all. Ibonia's idiosyncrasies reveal something about the epic hero's character but they also show us some fantastic side of human nature.

There is a trickster, a boastful character, a romantic who longs for his beloved from the time when he is conceived.

In the present times, scholars of world literature have moved away from the tendency of validating the epics of Africa on the basis of Western standards. Each epic is required to be seen in its own context, thus giving it the artistic and cultural autonomy. Mariam Konate Deme pronounces the supernatural as an essential condition for all African epics in his article "Heroism and the Supernatural in the African Epic Toward a Critical Analysis. He emphasizes the need to understand that the supernatural gives these epics their unique heroic perception. He further states that the supernatural does not in any way harm the reliability of the tale; it is an integral aspect of the epic and it symbolizes the human limitations of the hero and his desire to transcend them. "The supernatural gives agency to the hero in the sense that his actions are determined by his personality and will and that he is responsible for the consequences that result from his good or bad use of the powers that the higher authority has entrusted in him. Before he is even born, indeed right from the womb, the hero makes choices that affect his family, as well as the entire community" (417).

The miraculous birth of the hero and the preceding prolonged period spent in the mother's womb are some of the distinctive thematic and structural features of the *Ibonia* epic. These events cover a major part of the story and foreshadow the action to be followed. The boastful, demanding and choosy hero is essentially to be perceived as a human being passing through various stages of life. His quest for right birthplace and right name display his fastidious nature and also his humanity. This epic from Madagascar is rich with many stylistic and thematic elements that need further study. The present attempt has been confined only to some selected motifs.

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