

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLEDGE

## Otwere, Mbosi Traditional Institution in Congo-Brazzaville, African Literary Field

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### **Abstract:**

*Like Humanism, a literary movement of European thought during the Renaissance which is characterized by a return to ancient texts as a model of life, writing and thought (1304-1374), Otwere is also interested in teaching Embosi language, mbosi literature and culture. In his past considered as traditional literature, the institution Otwere entered the annals of written literature after the negritude, movement created in the late 1930s that brings together French-speaking African and African writers to highlight African cultures. According to several sources, the first form of French-speaking African literature appeared in 1920. Otwere, despite its presence in the Mbosi milieu since pre-colonial times, only officially became known as literature in the 1970s when Congolese researchers give special attention. In this work we will present the metamorphoses of Otwere, its stages of transformation, that is to say, from its traditional oral form to today's so-called modern or written.*

**Keywords:** *Otwere, twere, mbosi, orality, tradition, institution, community*

### **1. Introduction**

The Mbosi are a Bantu-speaking population originating from the Great Lakes region of Central Africa established in the Republic of Congo, after a migration from the east to the center in the 1850s, particularly in the department of Cuvette, near Oyo, and Plateaux, around Ollombo. Other communities live in the west of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as in eastern Gabon. However, to better organize their community space, the Mbosi create Otwere, a traditional institution whose fundamental principles were the well-being of citizens, living together and social justice. It is these themes that deal with the Mbosi Culture and Civilization that give Otwere the function of literature. This set of topics studied were all related to the management of the society. For the record, the Otwere institution was not as sovereign as some observers think. Although it controlled the action of the chieftainships but still acted under the authority of the land chiefs who had the right to decide on its composition and organization. However, despite its relevance in conflict management, Otwere has remained little visible on the international scene. It was not until the implosion of movements like Negritude and multiple organizations of writers from Black Africa and the Caribbean after the Second World War (1945) that this literature found its place in the African literary world. The political and administrative history of Congo puts much more emphasis on the kingdoms (Kongo, Loango and Teke) because of the ease of access of South Congo by the Congo-Ocean railway. On the other hand, the history of the chieftaincies is almost non-existent. This may be because in the northern part, at that time, access was only by boat on the Congo River which was difficult to navigate. This situation could not facilitate the mobility of white settlers. Today, writings are available on Otwere and the chieftaincies, which promotes knowledge of the way of life of the Ngala and Mbosi living in the north of the country. In this study, after having explained the interest of the study of Otwere and its principles, we will move on to its comparison with modern justice to finally close the circle by presenting its problems as well as those of African literature.

#### *1.1. Area of Study*

The Mbosi people live in central and northern Congo-Brazzaville, which they share with the Teke, Sangha, Maka, Pygmies and Oubangu peoples. It occupies both banks of the Alima River, the Likouala Mossaka and the right coastline of the Congo River. The area occupied by the Mbosi corresponds administratively to the regions (currently Department) of the Cuvette, the West-basin and plateaux, specifically to the districts of: Mossaka, Oyo, Tchikapika, Boundji, Ngoko, Makoua, Ntokou, Owando, Mbomo, Etoumbi, Abala, Allembe, Ollombo, Ongogni, Makotipoko and Gamboma.

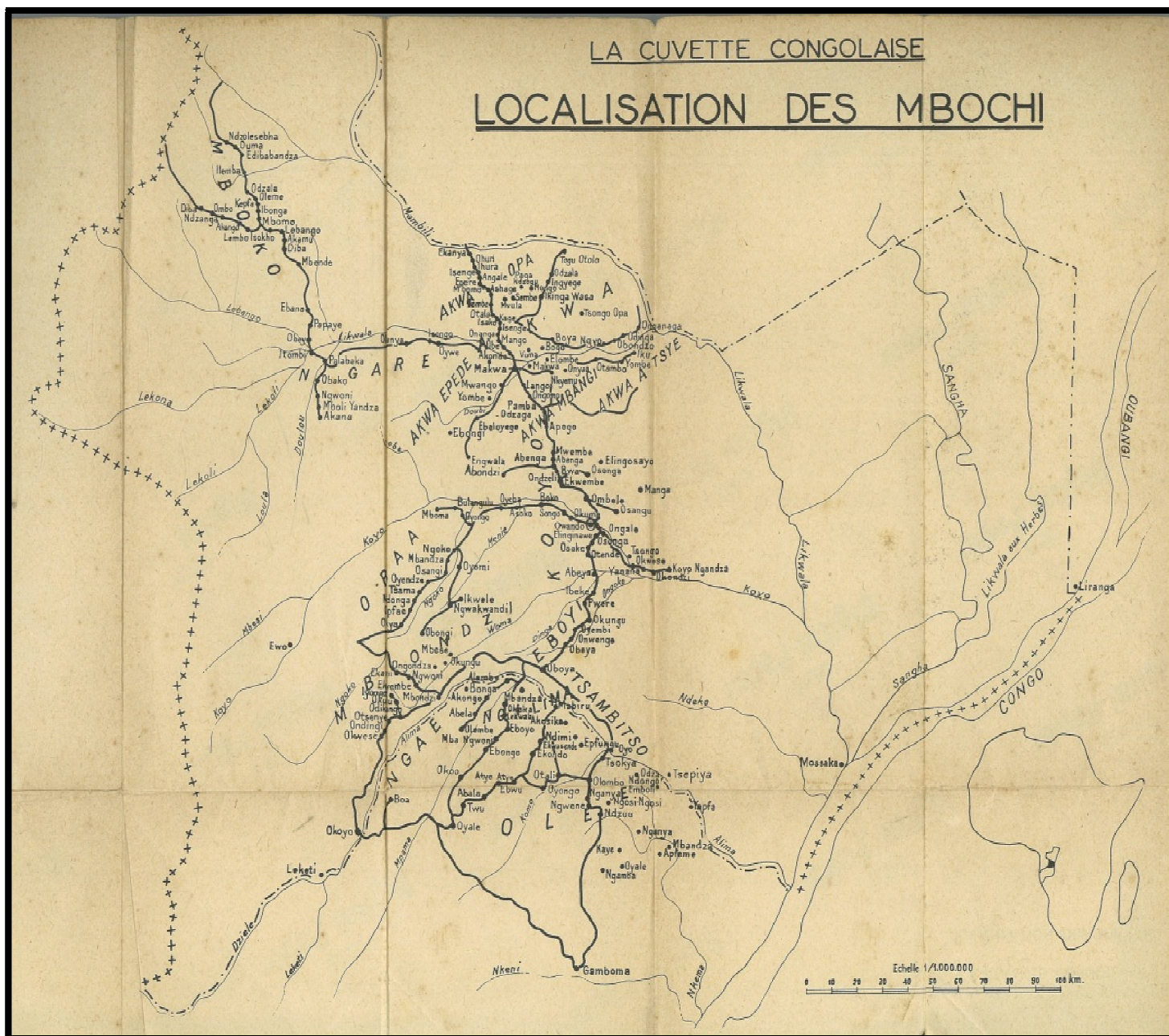
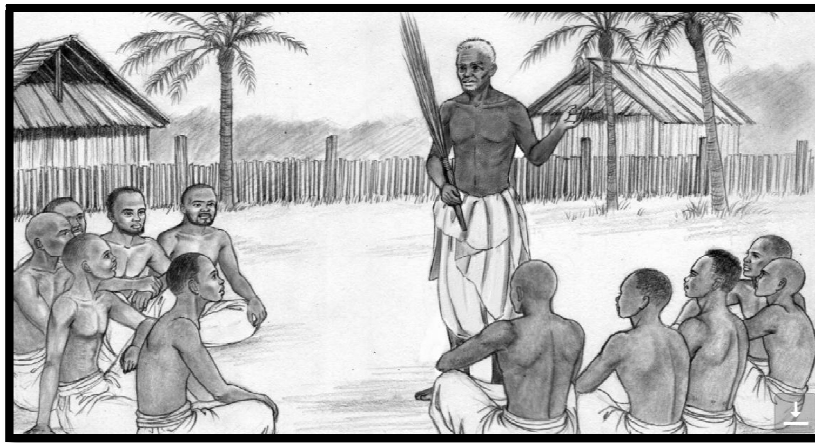


Figure 1: Localization of Mbochi  
 Source: T. Obenga, "The Congolese Cuvette. Men and Structures, Contribution to the Traditional History of Central Africa", Presence Africaine 1976

1.2. Literary Review

Research on Otwere, a traditional institution of justice of the Mbochi people, has forced us to make many sacrifices because of insufficient information. In African societies in general and in the Mbochi society in particular, oral expression still has a say, that is to say, still holds an important part of information that must be continued. The depositories of experience or knowledge about the traditions because of the sacrifices that this requires unfortunately transmit them often only to the initiates whom they trust, but who unfortunately do not master the writing to save these virtues. An old man who dies is a burning library, Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1980). Already in 1982, given the fact that the last generation of Otwere's witnesses were gradually dying out as they got older, he invited the younger generations of researchers to quickly collect data, because according to him, 20 years later a vacuum had to be created in terms of information. Experience shows that societies without writing are dead societies, so doomed to extinction. As far as the Otwere institution is concerned, writing arrives in its living space while it is already in crisis because of the influence of colonization which has resulted in the destruction of its working instruments or symbols. This explains the decline of Otwere that we found explanations in the book entitled : Otwere, traditional judicature of Bishop GASSONGO B. : Otwere. Ancestral Judicature among Mbochis (1979). This is the reference or

basic work on the institution Otwere in Mbosi country. In this book, the author defines Otwere, gives his characteristics, the conditions of membership and describes his ritual functioning. It also clears the cause of Otwere's decline. This book has been an indispensable source for our work. Joseph Itoua in his doctoral thesis in history entitled: *The Otwere Traditional Institution Among Mbosi Olee in Congo Brazzaville* (2006), presents Otwere as an institution that guaranteed life in the Mbosi community space before presenting its threat and its decline caused by the passage of Western culture in Mbosi medium. Otwere as traditional justice today faces a great opposition of modern law. Ngalebaye D. in his book: *Otwere. Mbosi traditional justice in the face of the challenges of Congolese modernity* (2010), highlights the conflict between law and custom, which hinders the constitution of our African states into nations (...) and explains what it calls the infra-right. As we have seen, many States have serious problems with the application of the rules of traditional justice because of ethnic diversity. Indeed, the Congo has 52 ethnic groups, each of which has its custom, which it considers the best of all. Thus, in fact, in public as in private, the members of each group prefer, consciously or unconsciously, to apply the norms of their custom to the detriment of positive law, Ngalebaye D. (2010). Thus, in certain parts of Africa, there are conflicts of identity: religious conflict between Sudan and South Sudan, ethnic conflict between Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda, racial segregation in South Africa, identity conflict in South Africa. Democratic Republic of Congo, etc. Contrary to the reductive European opinion that Black Africa is a world without civilization, Joseph Itoua discovers that the supreme institution of the Mbosi society, Otwere, had endowed its people with a civilization. Among the identity elements of this civilization, the author emphasizes the justice system in the middle Mbosi Olee. Indeed, what does Otwere represent in Mbosi thought? What is the scientific observation of rituals through the various ceremonies? In his book titled *Otwere Traditional Institution at Mbosi Congo-Brazzaville* (2010), j. Itoua finds that the Mbosi community is dominated by the Otwere institution, which appears as a vision of the world, a system of representation, with an ideology that guides its action in all dimensions of political, social, economic and cultural life, this hold that the supreme institution had on the people until the 1950s, which marked its decline. Moreover, it should be noted that apart from these main works, there are secondary works, that is, other writers who have written about Otwere (but not thoroughly) and the Mbosi traditions. which also allowed us to develop our study. The Twere as a traditional judge has attracted the attention of some authors who have devoted particular studies to it. MONDZO J. C. In: *Customary justice in Congo-Brazzaville. From the exam* MONDZO J. C. In *Customary justice in Congo-Brazzaville. From the example of the Twere among the Mbochis Nowadays*, Thesis of Doctorate in Law, Center of Studies and Legal Research on the Spaces Mediterranean and African Francophone, (2002), put at our disposal important elements for our research. This thesis is a description of the traditional justice of the Mbosi of the Northern Congo based on Otwere and rendered by the Kani and Twere. From the opposition between modern law and customary law it is recalled that: The work of A. Ndinga-Oba *On the banks of the Alima* (2003), tells us about the Twere's role in society. This book is a dialogue between the author and his daughter. He introduces the latter to the realities of the ancestral Mbosi tradition. The Otwere question occupies a prominent place in this dialogue. NDINGA-MBO A. C. in his book: *For a history of Congo-Brazzaville. Methodology and Reflections* (2003) provides useful information on Mbosi and their Otwere institution. It is a work both methodological and reflections on the history of Congo. NDINGA-MBO A. C. in: *Onomastics and history of Congo- Brazzaville* (2004), presents the contribution of onomastics in the historiographical research of Congo-Brazzaville from the Kongo and Ngala populations. The Mbosi occupy a place of choice with their identification and the analysis of the characteristic features of their civilization. OBENGA T. in: *Introduction to the history of the people of the People's Republic of Congo*, National Office of Popular Libraries (1972), presents the different ethnic groups of the Congo. This work has been an important source for our work. T. OBENGA in: *The Congolese bowl. Men and structures*, Présence Africaine (1976), apprehend the totality of the culture of this people at all levels, from what conditions, perpetuates and gives meaning to it, from the natural environment to language and its other structures productive and meaningful are kinship, economics and politics. This is the basic work on the Mbosi group. OBENGA T. in: *The traditional literature of Mbochis. Etsee le yamba* (1984), presents the traditional literary genres of the Mbosi people, translated and commented on: poems-songs relating to natural and astronomical phenomena, national cosmogony, rites, powers and magic, the celebration of twins, the kiebe-kiebe dance, in a state of maternity, in varied recreational dances, in peasant loves, in mourning elegies, in the literary entertainment of children, etc. Tales, proverbs, maxims and riddles are not forgotten. In their study titled: *Definition and Portrait of Nzoonzi in Nkoongo culture in Congo-Brazzaville*, Kidiba J.F. and Yekoka S. (2013), referring to the role of the traditional judge Nzoonzi, who have consistently extolled national values even going so far as to compare it to the modern judge who does not know what to say the right instead of interiorizing it to make it a part of his life as it is for the traditional judge. This study has interested our work for the light it brings to customary law and modern law.



*Figure 2: The Customary Judge during the Palaver*  
 Source: M. Obah Design and Loupongrou Realization

### 1.3. Otwere's Methodology of Study

This work intends to use firstly the interview technique, then the exegetical method, and finally the documentary method.

The interview technique consists of developing an interview guide that allows us to collect necessary data on our research through the resource persons. It is a development of a questionnaire focused on the different interviews with people who can give us the necessary information to carry out this work. Thus, during this research we have interest to go on the ground.

The documentary method: This part contains written documents that we used to complete this research. It was not until late in the middle of the nineteenth century that the use of the ballpoint pen and paper made its entry into the search for documents in the Mbossi society. What also makes the documents existing there, are recent documents. Orality has up to now been an obligatory passage, a creed in a society where most of the knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation. With regard to our subject on "Otwere, African Literary Field", several data are currently available in Congo-Brazzaville. The internet has been one of the most consulted sources. PhD dissertations and scientific articles in the libraries of : Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, Cheick Anta Diop of Dakar in Senegal, Kinshasa University in the DRC and CCNU of Wuhan in China also constituted the bulk of our documentation.

The exegetical method, whose main authors are: Joseph Itoua and Didier Ngalebaye, is applied to analyze the texts on Otwere, to see how the Otwere institution moves in space (the Mbossi society) for the application of its principles. How other writers approach Otwere's question by overriding his true status. This method also allows us to have a critical mind.

Basically, for the accomplishment of this work, the collected data were all in relation with our interest and the obtained orientations were very significant for the lighting of the organization of our argumentation



*Figure 3: Modern Justice*  
 Source: M. Obah Design and Loupongrou Realization

#### 1.4. Difference between Otwere, Customary Law and Modern Law

Traditional justice has No unique shape. It is made according to the aspirations of the local communities. That's why in its application, it does not work like state law.

Traditional justice: Tradition refers to the customs and habits of society. This justice is as important as the national law for the reason that it allows the inhabitants of the village to find appropriate solutions to their disputes. Traditional law comes from old practices and beliefs that many people are bound to respect. If in local communities some national authorities respect these traditional systems of justice, it is because, not only they are the inheritance of ancestral small self-regulating societies, compensating for their deficit, but because they complement the right of State. These systems should adapt during colonization, to the modern state and its national justice system. They are different from one country to another. In some governments, they are officially recognized because they currently handle the majority of court cases in many developing countries. As we see, the goal of these justice systems is to guarantee peace and coexistence in the social communities (villages). In these localities, the role of this justice is to settle as a family conflicts that could separate the inhabitants concerned. The punishments did not constitute the outcome of the issues to be settled. The settlement of conflicts was done by repairing the fault of the guilty around palaver to promote and strengthen the balance and the social fabric. But what is unfortunate is the fact that some of these traditional systems of justice are harsh and discriminatory against women. The field of action of women was very small. Their opinions during the palaver, when needed were only issued in the corridors.



Figure 4: Conflict Prevention through Girls' Education  
Source: M. Obah Design and Loupongrou Realization

Modern justice: Modern justice, or state justice, is a justice that often goes through the application of offenses to people found guilty to repair the mistakes committed. In state justice, he who pert, pert all and whoever wins, wins everything. It often opposes and divides in the rural communities, the inhabitants accustomed to live together.

#### 1.5. The Motivational Causes of the Otwere Study

African literature of colonial times has been subject to several challenges. For lack of writing, knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation. There was no material for collection of oral texts. Today, despite the presence of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the Mbosi community, this literature still presents challenges. This is what interests us in part in this work. What is the responsibility of governments, national organizations and researchers in a world where most of the knowledge is transmitted orally? Otwere which constitutes our main subject in this work was the Mbosi cultural base, it was also a school of orality. Most of the knowledge was only passed on to insiders. This institution has lost its culture of the past because of the colonial influence. Reconstructed, what are Otwere's new challenges? At the moment studies are available on Otwere, but many of its aspects still remain to be studied. Basically, our concern in this work is made up of two aspects: Theoretical and practical.

At the theoretical level, the interest of this work is to deepen the knowledge of the civilization and the literature of the Mbosi people who share their traditions with the other peoples of their neighborhood having the same historical cultural values. Since 2010, researchers have given him a particular interest. After the study conducted by Bishop B. Gassongo on Otwere. Ancestral judicature among Mbochis (1979), there are many other authors who studied Otwere, each according to his interest. Otwere is treated in this work as Mbosi literature. A literature based on ancestral traditions, organizes the present and guides the future.

In practical terms, the interest of this work is to make the achievements of Otwere for all Mbosi a reference, better a legacy. National authorities, international organizations, the armed forces, in short, all institutions responsible for peace and security, should wherever the human rights, the individual freedoms are veiled, draw inspiration from the principles of Otwere, a traditional institution of social justice which is to be a social contract. Otwere, for memory, without swords, without weapons, without prisons, managed to put order where so-called modern societies with all the arsenal of security fail. Today there are challenges of the language of expression and the object of study, the challenges of culture. In general, most African executives who have graduated from European schools only write in borrowed languages (English and French). This situation only benefits owners of these languages rather than Africans. Even today emulations in literature put them in a situation where they must produce their works taking into account the European or international standard. They must participate in the book fair, at different literary awards. As a reminder, a literary prize is a distinction awarded for a particular literary work by public or private institutions, associations, academies, foundations or individuals. Most of the prizes are awarded annually and are accompanied by the award of a sum of money, a scholarship or an art object, (Fr.m.wikipedia.org). Among these prizes are: the Nobel Prize for Literature (1901), the Hans Christian Andersen Prize (1956), the Arts and Letters of France Prize (1974), the European Literature Prize (2005), the Charles Veillon Prize (1947-1974) ; European Prize of the Essay Charles Veillon (1975); Senghor Prize, awarded each year to a first French novel (2006); Francophone Literature Award Jean Arp (2004); Literary Grand Prix of Black Africa; Erich-Fried Prize (1990); Alain Decaux Prize of La Francophonie (1999); Price of the book L'oriental (2011); Prix Théophraste-Renaudot or Prix Renaudot (1926), recently obtained by the French writer of Congolese origin Alain Mabanckou for his novel, Mémoires de porc-épic (2006).

Given that these so-called international literary awards are decided outside the African continent, this is a problem because Africans must write in European languages and then submit to the analysis or appreciation of their cultural works for selection at these prizes often organized in Europe. These are all challenges that African writers face.

### 1.6. Otwere's Main Problem

Africa is a land that has suffered many hardships. Slavery, economic plunder, acculturated, speaking the languages of other peoples (European countries). But liberated, the fights to be carried out are multiple. So, in this work, it is question to show how the Mbosi, are organized through the Otwere institution to take up the challenges related to the domination of their culture. As a reminder, the Mbosi were also victims of the colonial exploitation. The documents necessary for their civilization and their literature were carried away. Thus, through Otwere we will see how the Mbosi organized their socio-political life. Otwere appears nowadays as a vision of the world, a system of representation, with an ideology that guides its action in all dimensions of life: social, political, economic and cultural, Joseph Itoua (2003).

<b>"Otwere a di ndé?" (What is Otwere?)</b>	
The minning of Otwere in Mbosi Language Tsina y'Otwere (m'Embosi)	The meaning of Otwere (translation in English)
Otwere ndzali mbeyi y'okili	Otwere is customary law, social justice
Otwere ndzali lebeyi la tsengue	Otwere is the social code, the traditional judicature, the fundamental law
Otwere ndzali akongo m'onoo	Otwere is rhetoric, know-how, wisdom, philosophy, literature (theoretical meaning)
Otwere ndzele	Otwere is an Art, an organization, an institution, a managerial science, a social science (practical sense)
Otwere ikenaa la poo	Otwere is skill, agility, dexterity, expertise
Otwere ndzali mbamba sanga	Otwere is a binding power, a test, a mystical power, a dangerous exercise, a war, (involving a lot of sacrifices)
Otwere kinda	Otwere is the power of defense, protection (village, clan, territory)

Table 1: The Original Meaning of Otwere

Initially, a simple judicial institution, that is to say, in charge of the settlement of questions related to the socio-political life, Otwere constitutes today a true tool of defense against the invader of this noble culture. Otwere as a defense tool, today faces the challenges of modernity. The following questions can help us understand its effectiveness: What is Otwere, what is its mission? What are its great challenges in a globalized world and what is its general vision of this world? These important questions are of particular interest to any observer of the socio-cultural and political life of the Mbosi society. This is how we devote to this institution a particular study

## 1.7. *Problems of African Literature*

### 1.7.1. Language of the Drafting

With a population of nearly one and a half billion, grouped into 54 states, Africa has more than a thousand languages classified into four major groups. The problem is that most of these languages lack a transcription or writing system. In several documents found in ancient Egypt dating back to antiquity there are transcripts that have not been developed into an African language. Ethiopia has maintained its transcripts which are the pride of this continent, and which become a language that can be exploited. In Ethiopia, calculations are made to develop the economy and to impose their language. Through the creation of a large market that attracts consumers and investors, Ethiopians can impose their language, as China has done. Language is an economic weapon. The Asian languages that are not easy to learn have now passed for peak languages or languages to learn thanks to the economic weight of these countries.

For other languages, the transcription came into contact with the religions of the book. Some languages, such as Wolof or Kiswahili, used an Arabic script before adapting a transcription in Latin characters. While some writers use African languages directly, others use European languages taught in particular in schools. These European languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish) still have until today their hegemonic character to express the domination of the white race. So, nowadays, many writers believe that the use of these European languages makes more visible their actions in the continent. According to O. Ladin, there was a moment when African writers to promote their stigmatized languages by settlers chose to abandon the languages of the former colonizer to adopt an African language. The examples are numerous. The Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o who wrote in Kikuyu, giving up English. It inspired the Senegalese Boris Boubacar Diop, preferring Wolof to French because these European languages are for the most part associated with modernity

## 2. Themes

After a good weather there is often rain. After the departure of the white settlers, the young African states, have enormous difficulties to manage the vacuum created in their young states. The struggle for independence is transformed into civil wars. These conflicts and these wars are far from finding a way out. The violence of contemporary societies is also a regular feature of novels. Kourouma portrays child soldiers in Allah is not obliged, as does the Nigerian living in the United States Uzodinma Iweala in *Beasts without homeland*. The novels, like *Waiting for the vote of the wild beasts of the Ivorian* Ahmadou Kourouma, testify to the disappointments of these pioneers of the African literature. J. M. Coetzee has concentrated a part of his work on the analysis of today's world, of which miscegenation and globalization is a problem. Xenophobia, anti-Semitism, separation undermines all efforts of federalization and globalization.

The time of the war against white settlers is over, from the struggle against the apartheid regime and its abolition in 1994 in South Africa has passed; now African writers write about their disappointment vis-à-vis the governance of their states. The different political regimes that succeed each other at the head of the States often causing economic chaos are only disappointments. This is a big theme giving many inspirations to many authors of this continent.

Since the celebration of the International Day of Women's Rights on March 8 each year, women have become more and more involved in literature in Africa. They write more about improving the status of women. Equality between home and women is now a big issue for these women who aspire to more responsibilities in the management of public affairs. Across Africa, there is liberation of speech, but we still see that a large number of writers, are still faced with the problem of exile (voluntary or imposed) for their opinions.

## 3. The Origin of African Literature

Before the arrival of writing, the Mbosi people like other Africans used dating methods that do not give today certain details on their transcripts. The Mbosi calendar, for example, had only 4 days, which makes it more difficult to succeed in the search. Archaeological tools on the African continent are not new. It is called the "cradle of humanity" for its ancient remains. Literature is entirely related to people's way of life, and African literature seems to be one of the oldest in the world. To say at what period this literature was born amounts to locating at what time was born the oral literature. Its origins, its modes of transmission and its collection in written form are not always easy to trace. As for the written literature, as we traditionally conceive it; it really took off in the 1930s, especially in colonial times.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

All in all, Otwere as literature, as it is the case in this text, is a means of preserving identity, social gains in society. In the times before colonization, it was the Mbosi supreme institution that guaranteed peace and security of people and property. It can be said that this form of literature played its full role before being fought by Western culture. Today this form of oral literature is giving way more and more to writing and other means of communication. Fortunately, many intellectuals in the sub region are making great efforts to save the essential virtues of this oral literature by preserving a certain cultural continuity. This desire must be manifested by literary creation by encouraging the recording of oral texts. As a result, there is a manifestation of the creation of data centers and research on African traditions. Preservation in written form in English or French will give it more visibility. In all this, what is problematic is the use of these traditional texts in foreign languages. The difficulty is the adaptation of this oral literature to European literature which functions according to the international literary

movement. But what is also worrying is the fact that Africa gives the impression that it did not save anything cultural. The finding today is that despite the effort provided by African researchers individually, the government does not take any look in this area for its development. These values, heritage of our ancestors are to be saved. In their day without important technologies or cultural defense means, they gave what they could to organize life, for our identity that our generation has lost. Development is first and foremost a cultural problem. Africa still has big challenges to overcome despite important cultural reservations like Otwere which is the subject of our subject

## 5. Acknowledgements

I thank, very sincerely, the Chinese Government and the Chinese Scholarship Council for granting me this doctoral postgraduate scholarship. This scholarship is for me an opportunity to question myself and evaluate my potential for higher education by contributing to scientific research. I also thank Professor Luo Lianggong, supervisor of my thesis for his availability, and the time he invests in my research. My thanks also go to my parents, friends and acquaintances for their varied contributions, not to mention the Congolese government that spares no effort to train its executives.

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