

Epics and Epic Poetry

African epics are coherently formulated extensive narratives (incomparably longer and more diversified in the number of actors, actions and events than any other genre), in which a main actor endowed with extraordinary gifts performs exceptional feats. Helped by a varied comitatus, the central hero owns powerful weapons and magical objects, allowing him to challenge and defeat many types of antagonists. The total background of the epic is marked by ceaseless strife, tension, challenge and trials. The principal protagonist's life is generally structured according to a recurring life pattern that starts with unusual circumstances preceding and coinciding with birth, abnormal maturation, temporary defeat and victory, temporary death and resurrection, final glory, mysterious death or eternal life. The style in which the African epics are performed (including song, recitation, narration, music, and eventually dramatic action by the bard, his aides and the audience) is lofty, poetic, extremely rich in vocabulary and in the nuanced usage of grammar and syntax. The bards are master narrators and singers. Bards and public attach great significance not merely to the coherence of the narrative content but also to its literary qualities. The abundant use of formulae (names of

individuals and groups, epithets for actors and places, circumlocutions for actions) is essential. Typical are also the catalogs, the genealogies, the enumerations and particularly the recounting of his deeds by the hero himself. Moreover it is significant that at least in some cultures these texts are recognized as something special and classified under a generic term that is different from all other literary genres. In all cases the performance of the epic text is accompanied by one or more prescribed musical instruments (such as the harp-lute, the xylophone, the ngoni tetracord, a three or four string “guitar”, the mvet cordophone, percussion sticks, a small drum, bells of different sizes, etc.). The instrument is played by the bard himself, by an aide or by a small group of musicians. Although parts of the story may be narrated or recited, sometimes very quickly, singing by the bard himself and/or by a chorus of helpers or audience always seems to be part of the performance. Epics are vast syntheses of literary and artistic values, spiritual and philosophical ideas, social and political institutions, technological achievements. They offer extremely rich cultural information. They also constitute a comprehensive form of literature, incorporating most other literary genres (tales, aphorisms, songs, praises, prayers, incantations). Oral and written epics and epic poetry have a wide distribution and are very ancient in the traditions of many peoples. Except for the written Swahili

epics, the existence of African epics was unknown, ignored or questioned until recently. There are still scholars in diverse disciplines who refuse to label as epics these special types of narrative, using arguments that fail to discern the unique characteristics of these texts and the many textual and literary features these African narratives have in common with similar products of world literature.

Part of this scepticism is caused by the fact that numerous texts presented as epics are only episodes, fragments or abstracts of a larger whole. In most epic-producing African cultures the epics are open-ended. This means that different bards, depending on local tradition, personal skill, actual mood, specific circumstances can start and end the text in different ways, if they wish even in medias res. Enlightened bards can insert, reverse, eliminate, extend or reduce an indefinite number of specific episodes. It is therefore difficult to say how long the total epic text is and how long its total performance might last.

It is also true that a considerable number of African genres have many textual and stylistic traits in common with true epics. Such related, but narrower categories comprise dynastic poetry (as in Rwanda), eulogies, praises and heroic recitations (as among the Xhosa or the Luba-Kasayi), tales about “enfants terribles” born under exceptional circumstances (as certain Dogon

and Bamana tales) and some animal trickster cycles (as Monimambu of the Kongo or Sangba Ture of the Zande).

An overwhelming amount of epic material has now been assembled and brought to the attention of the scholarly world. The following are among the major orally transmitted epic texts now published. For West Africa, versions: of Sunjata (Son-jara, Soundiata) among Mande-speakers in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, the Gambia; Da Monzon of Segou and Duga Koro among the Bamana; Kambili among the Maninka; Kaabu and Filadu among the Mandinka of the Gambia; Silamaka and Poullori, Ham-Bodedio, Samba-Gueledio and Kaidara among the Fulani; Mari Jagu from the Soninke; Askia Mohammed Zabarkane of the Songhay and Zarma, and Ozidi of the Ijo. For the Cameroons and Gabon, there are epic traditions about Zong Midzi and Akoma Mba, Moneblum or Blue Man, Oku and Enyong of the Fang, Ngog Bilon of the Basaa, Mulombi of the Bashira, Djeki-la-Njambe Inono from the Dwala and other groups (Batanga, Balimba, Banoo). For Central Africa versions and fragments of Lianja from the Mongo, of Mwindo and Kabutwakenda from the Nyanga, the Kiguma kya Kansindi and Mubila texts from the Lega have been recorded.

Beyond this horizon, the available published information does not allow to assess fully the extent to which local epic traditions flourish and are

distributed. From the large Mongo group in Zaire we know that the name Lianja is known to everybody and that the epic is widely distributed among the numerous Mongo subdivisions. There are continuities through the forest from the Mongo groups in western Zaire via the Hamba (Tetela) and Mbuli to the Lega and Nyanga in the eastern Zaire forest. Fragments of information indicate that the epic traditions go beyond this area, possibly among the Lunda, Songye and Luba, into Zambia. There are also striking similarities in patterns present in widely separated areas, such as the Djeki epic from the Dwala in Cameroun and the Mwindo epic of the Nyanga in Zaire.

Although genuine African epics constitute a genre of their own, major differences exist between West African and Bantu epics (i.e. those recorded for Cameroon, Gabon, Zaire).. Most of the West African epics have a strong historical and political foundation and are often backed up by chronicles that confirm, in various ways, the essential historical data of the epics. This obviously does not exclude the inclusion of the marvellous, the transcendental, the magical, but these features are less emphasized than in the Bantu epics. The extraordinary, unusual, the abnormal, the anti-social and what would often be conceived as mythical aspects are strongly placed in the foreground of the Bantu epic texts, although these are not devoid of less explicitly stated historical connotations. In Mande Sunjata is a historical

figure of the 13th century; the heroes Mwindo and Mubila among the Nyanga and Lega are not considered as historical figures, yet there are historical features (migrations, external and internal conflicts, the introduction of certain institutions) embedded in the texts.

In the entire area of distribution epics must be considered as something special that transcends historical, mythical or political considerations. It is essential to recall that bard and audience pay great attention to the purely artistic-aesthetic and literary characteristics of the text; to the quality of form, style and expression reflected in verbal skill, fluency of diction and song, poetic flight of imagination, originality of formulations, mastery of diversified vocabulary and refined manipulation of grammar and syntax, imagery, word play, onomatopoeia, ideophones, sonority, elaborate and clever formulae.

Correlated with some basic differences between West African and Bantu epics and, to some extent, with the socio-political structures of diverse ethnic groups are the status and modus operandi of the bards. In West African societies the bards belong to specialized castes of singers, within which the transmission and learning patterns follow very close patriarchal lines. Among the Bantu groups, the bards do not belong to a special caste, class or socio-political division. Among the many persons of both sexes who know to sing and to narrate, the epic bards are an elite of extremely gifted, enlightened,

multi-media creative artists. Such accomplished individuals may be found in any social group; they have learned informally (through friendship and steady companionship, passive and active participation in the performance) the essential elements of the epics from a kinsman or close acquaintance. As is the case among the Fang and Mongo some bards may consider a supernatural event to have led to their calling. The non-prescriptive aspect of learning and performing also allows for the fact that in Bantu groups such as the Lega and Shira artistically gifted women may perform as bards (but few texts have been recorded).

There are also overall differences in performance setting and style. Bards in West Africa mainly perform “privately”, frequently at the invitation of a political authority, or for a special ceremony, and sometimes at their own initiative. The performances of Bantu bards are public, communally oriented events that draw large audiences. In past decades the performances sometimes were associated with special occasions (rituals of initiation; large gatherings for a recurring renewal ceremony). The West African bard essentially depends for his living on the support and generosity of his sponsors; the Central African singer is a plain villager who engages in normal economic activities, but whose outstanding skills are publicly rewarded at the performances.

In both instances the performance of the epic text is accompanied by one or more prescribed musical instruments; this implies recitation and song. West African bards very much concentrate on the words and the music, without many gestures or mimicry or group participation. The performance of the Bantu epics constitutes a big dramatic event: a large audience responds in chorus singing, handclapping, praising, dance movements and gestures. The theatrical aspects are enhanced, as among the Mongo, where singers of the Lianja (Jibanja) epic have special dress: animal hide, body painting, feather hat, holding a spear or a ceremonial knife (the source of inspiration according to Mongo bards).

As far as form and content are concerned, the life cycle of the African epic hero follows a basic pattern, upon which individual bards in separate cultures build countless nuances. Some of the recurring themes of this life pattern tie the African epics in with models of world epic literature. They may include: exceptional circumstances of birth and early development at least of the main character; extraordinary gifts and qualities of the major actor and some other protagonists as well (possession of power-objects, quasi-invulnerability, power of speech, exuberant tirelessness); the presence of a comitatus (headed in Bantu epics by a sister, a wife or a paternal aunt); endless adventures in search of adversaries guided by a particular aim (to recover an object, to

revenge the death of a father or the offense of a kinsman); realisation of the hero's goals. Although structural patterns are inherent in the epics, free creativity, inventiveness, imagination are inseparable from the individual performances. Hence the numerous differences in elaborating, for example, the birth or glory of the hero.

Some epics have much description, others are essentially based on dialogue, including challenge, ridicule, self-praise. In some epics the intervention of supernatural beings or anthropomorphic animals is strongly emphasized in the life experiences of the main actors, in others it is virtually absent.

It is not easy to discover which functions epic narratives had in earlier times, because most of our information is gathered rather recently, when numerous changes had occurred. These changes did not necessarily affect form and content of the epics (the Mwindo and Mubila epics from Zaire recorded in the fifties move in a world where apparently no colonisation or evangelisation ever existed). Certainly some functions have changed or disappeared, in fact in numerous groups the epics themselves have declined, disappeared or are on the wane. The traditional functions of the epics are possible combinations of the following: high-level entertainment based on outstanding verbal and musical artistry and group interaction; ethnic and/ or dynastic and familial pride in historical feats and cultural achievements; reformulation and

confirmation of historical events and socio- political and ethical values; assertion of philosophical and cosmological ideas; reaffirmation of group solidarity. Didactic functions run as a leitmotiv through the vast cultural syntheses presented by the epic texts.

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