

THE AFRICAN EPIC

The African epic is a subject that is not widely known by African studies specialists of West Africa, but then is still less well known in the northern hemisphere. Even in the Encyclopaedia Universalis of 1968, African epics were given very little mention and somehow overshadowed by the medieval European chanson de geste, the Greek and Latin epic poems and the sizeable corpus of Indo-European epics from that of Gilgamesh to the Mahabharata.

It should be stressed however that in 1968, Etiemble<sup>(1)</sup>, who had already been attracted by so many texts of Oriental epic literature, was acquainted with no more than two or three African epic works, being unaware at the time -and with good reason- of the importance of this literary genre on the African continent.

Etiemble was more concerned then with bringing forward a certain number of questions on the world epics and their origins (following all the theories of medievalists like G. Paris and Siciliano), as well as posing the problem of the supposed spontaneity of their composition against their quality as erudite literary works of art, which had been "reflected on at length and inflexibly elaborated by learned specialists", according to Dumezil's hypothesis. Etiemble was inclined to this latter opinion, citing in its favour Firdousi, Camoëns, Virgil and even Lönrot, with the Finnish Kalevala.

The fact that the African epics, essentially oral compositions to this day, are unable to conform to the above "mode of production" did not unduly trouble Etiemble in so far as he was then unaware of the real magnitude of this literary corpus and of its intrinsic vitality.

It is all the more surprising therefore to discover in the 1985 edition of the Encyclopaedia Universalis the extent to which Etiemble has revised his earlier opinion and this principally because of the African epics, to the point of ending his article on this paradoxical note : "We need to go back to square one".

What took place then between 1968 and 1985 for the Master to reopen the debate on a matter practically considered as closed by several generations of medievalists and with pronounced emphasis ?

The fact is that in the fifteen or 50 years following the article referred to, research in the field of African oral literature had brought to light some twenty epics, perfectly composed and of international significance. These were entirely oral and in their original African languages, transmitted by specialists undoubtedly, but who could no more be considered as "learned" or "erudite" than were the troubadours of Europe. The equivalent of the Gallic bard, they were not at all specially under the control of a class of "priests", with all due deference to Dumezil and to the "Latinists" (Bedier, Richi, etc...)

And so the question of the "popular" epic crops up again, as does, to some extent, the theory propounded by Gaston Paris that the renowned "cantilenas" were the probable source of the developments in medieval heroic poetry, questions which D. Madelenat reviews in his article on the epic while at the same time specifying the concept of the epic throughout history (2).

(1) author of the reference article on the epopee, together with Yoshida Atsuhiko in the Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1968.

(2) D. Madelenat, "L'épopée" in Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française - Bordas, 1985.



Martin de Riquer(1) had already taken this question into consideration when he contested Bedier using the Spanish Romancero del Cid as an example, but with certain reservations which we will refer to further on.

However our concern here is not so much with discussing the origin of the African epics, but to start by introducing them and then to proceed to a listing of several critics who have "handled" the African epic.

African epics could be classed into two main categories, namely the feudal and the clan epics, these two groups being, of course, of the "Homeric" type, to use the accepted classification, which is, in our opinion, the only one really corresponding to that definition of the epic whereby -despite hesitations and variants- the notion of a "long poem or lengthy narrative exalting a grand collective sentiment through the exploits of an historical or legendary hero"(2) recurs like a leitmotiv with all of the authors in question. There is also the Robert definition of a "long poem where the supernatural interplays with reality and whose goal is to extol a hero or a great event".

More precise still is the 1985 Robert dictionary definition of the Greek "Epos", signifying a "poetic discourse of a narrative and historic nature".

Hence the two components of length and poetic narrative are, as regards form, essential to the definition of the epic.

This would consequently rule out the inclusion of eulogistic or heroic poems of, let us say, less than 500 lines in the long epic poem category but not from epic literature in general. These types of poems are described by Zumthor as short or brief epic poems and what is more they also exist in Africa.

But the true epic or "epopee", comparable to the Song of Roland or to the Nibelungenlied, is one which extends from 2,000 to 20,000 lines or verses. This is the narrative of great amplitude which takes at least two hours if not half a day to relate, the African griots having perhaps more "breath" than their medieval counterparts. This however remains to be proved, because the average of 2000 lines in one and a half hours mentioned by Martin de Riquer is after all only a relative assumption.

However just like the troubadours, the griots of Africa often recite by episodes in the case of a lengthy epic poem with many segments. But if the epic is single (or not fundamentally episodic) they will readily relate it as a whole.

The epics then which are to be found in Africa fall into two types different enough from one another to be proposed as two operative categories : the feudal epics and the clan epics, which we wish to emphasize again.

Feudal epics are distinctive of societies organized into hierarchical professional castes in the manner of a pyramid and bearing, mutatis mutandis, features analogous to those of European feudal societies.

The epics are closely linked to the heroes and the warrior history of empires structured in the above fashion and, furthermore, they constitute an undeniable mine of information for African historiography.

These feudal epics can be compared to the European heroic epic poem, containing such elements as the following : one or several heroes around a king or a prince, political clashes resulting in wars, "homeric" contest, an apologia for valour, the exalting of the group involved in the triumphant or tragic outcome, and lofty deeds which leave their stamp on the collective awareness by giving shape to its system of values.

(1) M. de Riquer, Les chansons de geste française - Nizet, Paris, 1968..

(2) CNRS, - Tresor de la langue française - Klincksieck, 1980.



On this schema are built the narratives scanned on a musical rhythm and divided into stanzaic units of unequal length scattered with mottoes, eulogies, genealogies, chanted refrains and sometimes accompanied by choruses. The narrative itself is recited in a more elevated style than that of conversation or ordinary narration.

For instance the following Peul epics should be cited : Samba Gueladio Diegui, Silamaka and Poullorou, Hambodedio of the Kounari, Gueladio Hambodedio, Oumarel Sawa Donde, El Hadj Omar Tall, Moussa Molo of the Fouladou and others too.

In addition to these epics of a "political" nature are the pastoral and razzia epics such as Sampoletel and Goumarel, texts which are closer to the Russian "bylines" or to the Irish ballads, because of their more modest dimension, as well as the heroic tales of the Toucouleur fishers, known as the "pekan" genre.

As for the Wolof - Serer epics, there is the grandiose epic of the Kajor<sup>(1)</sup>, an empire which was to last for four centuries, with forty-two monarchs in all and the three cycles of the Serer Guelwaar heroic epic, the Kulaar, Siin and Gabou cycles<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Mandingo empires were a rich source of epic materials. But although many people know the legend of Soundiata<sup>(3)</sup>, now transcribed into a dozen or so versions, the Bambara epic of Segou, containing at least twelve episodes, is not so well known. This also applies to the Gabou epic, of which the best specialists are Guinean or Gambian<sup>(4)</sup>.

There are also epic narratives about Samory Touré, Babemba of Sikasso. ~~and the Diela of Keng~~. If one goes to the Soninké people (North Mali and East Senegal) and to the Sonrhail, a sub-ethnic group of the former (Niger, East Mali), one can hear recited the great epic narrative of the migration of the Soninké and the fall of the Wagadou empire. Here, all depending on the narrator who is reciting the legend, the text can change from myth to epic.

More precisely in the epic genre is the narrative of ~~Akka Mohamed~~ as well as that of the dispersal of the Kusa<sup>(5)</sup> and that of the Diawara. Also to be considered as epics are the narratives of Issa Korombe of the Zerma, whereas the story of Zabarkane, like the Wagadou legend, lies between myth and epic.

Indeed it becomes clear that in these feudal societies the more ancient the events are (the Wagadou and Zabarkane legends reach even farther back than the 10th century), the more the narrative will take on the allure of a myth of origins.

The epic narratives of Rwanda, the "ibite Kerezo"<sup>(6)</sup>, should also be put into the feudal epic category, as their purpose is mainly that of an historical commemoration of the Tutsi princes and their conquests. These are to be distinguished from the dynastic "ibisigo" poetry which is more of the praise poem type.

Perhaps in this feudal category we should also include the epics in Swahili, a half-dozen of which were collected in Tanzania and which relate to the wars dating from the beginning of this century.

- (1) Such as the Kajor epic recorded by Bassirou Dieng
- (2) Using the categories of the Reverend Father Gravrand in his work, Cosaan ed. NEA, Dakar, 1983.
- (3) Dj. Tamsir Niane.
- (4) Prof. Kaba, et B. Sidibe. The Gabou epic's major versions are in the Mandinka language.
- (5) ed. by CL. Meillassoux, Doucoure, Simagha at IFAN, Dakar.
- (6) Alexis Kagame, Introduction aux grands genres lyriques de l'ancien Rwanda, Butare, ed. Univ. of Rwanda, 1969.

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We shall conclude this by no means exhaustive overview of the feudal type of epic in examining, though very briefly, the case of the Chaka legend.

In 1970 we made the mistake of classifying the Chaka legend as a traditional epic in our short handbook on this topic<sup>(1)</sup>, being unaware then that Thomas Mofolo's text did not have an oral equivalent in the Sotho or Zulu languages. Now, according to Ruth Finnegan, the epic, "in the normal sense of the term", is not to be found among these ethnic groups. Certainly, the panegyric songs about Chaka and his exploits abound, but the eulogistic element is the dominating feature of the story and the narration of a unified epic experience alone does not exist at all. In short we have here a pre-epic situation, however the true Chaka epic would be the one written by Mofolo in the Sotho language.

In order to determine this question, D.P. Kunene's work, Heroic poetry of the Basotho<sup>(2)</sup> should be consulted and this we have been unable to do as yet.

But whatever may be said, Mofolo's Chaka is indeed an African epic, even if it is more novel than epic in form, because it lacks rhythm, music and most of all the "triumphant communicative function", as noted so aptly by Zumthor.

The clan epics, which we shall now discuss, are always very long narratives, punctuated by musical accompaniment and enumerating the valorous exploits of a heroic figure. But, by and large, they deviate far more from the history of the peoples which produce them. They take on a distinctly fantastic character. This supernatural aspect often reduced to ordinary magical elements in the feudal epics, here reaches exaggerated, indeed surrealist proportions, a phenomenon which could be compared to sculptural art forms, -just as certain ethnic groups (the Baoule, Tchokwe, Yoruba, Benin) produce a "classical" and almost realistic statuary art, others will evolve a surrealist style (the Lega, Songye, Ibibio, Bafum) where all kinds of grotesque forms are ventured.

The exploits of the Douala Heroes, such as Djekki the Njambe, the Bulu and Fang heroes, like Akomo Mba, Engouang Ondo, Oveng Ndoumou Obane and Bassa heroes like the Sons of Hitong know no bounds : they confront the ocean in battle, stride over the clouds, cleave mountains, plunge vampires into the bowels of the earth. Their confrontations (always as a contest however) are commotions on a cosmic scale. Furthermore these heroic figures are descendants of the sun or moon and part of the very nature which they dominate in the epic, to the extreme delight of the purely human audiences.

The clan epic also very often proposes marginal and even totally asocial individuals as heroes, an example of this type being Moni Mambou in the Pende epic or Hitong from the Bassa legend. A complete research study remains to be carried out in order to discover the exact functions of such heroes in this "collective" literature meant to develop national aspirations.

It is this same type of hero that one finds in the Ozidi Saga of the Yoruba<sup>(3)</sup> heroes which are characterized by their excesses, where the individual's desire for power is intensified in reaction to societies which adamantly deny all emergence of the individual, independent initiative, or the promotion of young men over the village gerontocracy.

In the epics from the Congo, such as the Lianja tale of the Mongo-Nkudo, a study of which has been made by E. Boelaert, or the Mwindo Epic of the Banyanga, it is more a question of mythical founding heroes or preservers of the clan, whose exploits serve a catalyzer for the aspirations of the clan, which is exalted by the performance of the poem.

(1) L. Kesteloot, L'épopée traditionnelle, Nathan.

(2) Kunene, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971.

(3) G. P. Clark, The Ozidi Saga of the Yoruba.



Moreover when the structure of these narratives is analysed, they seem quite extraordinarily long to begin with. Thus certain Mvet songs can go on "from 6 in the evening to 8 in the morning" as Herbert Pepper has verified, -Eno Belinga for his part talks of 70,000 verses. However when one takes pains to record the entire narrative, it becomes evident that the text proper is not very much longer than that of the feudal epics, but it is just more often broken by songs, dance steps, mimes, exchanges with the audience, and pauses to eat and drink. Ultimately it is a kind of intermittent theatrical performance, which no-one, neither actors nor public, seems anxious to see come to an end.

The clan epic therefore has a very specific "physiognomy" (if I may say so) when compared to the feudal epic, which is related by the story-teller in a noble style, with dignified bearing, without gesticulations and with little mimicry. The function of the feudal epic being also decidedly political, it is natural that it should be presented with all the gravity given to "state affairs."

The point where these two types of African epic converge is in the specialization of the interpreter-creator. Indeed, the epic is never recited -contrary to the folktale or the short story- by the uninitiated. I would even go further by saying that until there is proof to the contrary, it is neither the social structures (societies with warrior castes as presumed by Dumezil and Yoshida Atsuhiko), nor the presence of learned specialists (Etiemble, Siciliano) which suffices to explain the composition of the African epics. Thus we have kingdoms like those of the Ashanti and the Baoule, and better still the Bamoun kingdom, which had a warrior class and writing, but none of these societies produced epics. The Bamileke chiefdoms have their chronicles, but no epics either.

On the other hand, the Fang have never created structured or centralized states, but they have the Mvet and the Obamba-Bateke the Olende epic.

The Mongo have their epics. However the Kuba kingdom, far more organized and structured hierarchically, has only one chronicle which records the stages of its history and its kings, but without the least literary development.

After having posed the problem at the colloquium of Yaounde and having discussed the matter in particular with Professor Vilmos Voigt, we came to the conclusion that the prerequisite necessary to epic production was the existence of a specialized class, whose profession is the memorization, conservation and glorification of the valiant feats of a prince or national heroes, -the bard, the minstrel, the guslar or the trovar of Europe and the dyali, the gesere, the mbômô mvet, the bilum player of Africa.

Mr Voigt informed us that in Roumania, in two regions sharing the same dialect, one had an epic tradition, whereas the other did not. The epic genre is also the only one to have professional, itinerant bards.

We also remark that in Africa, the Baoule or Bamoun kingdoms and the Bamileke chiefdoms do not have professional singers responsible for preserving and exalting their traditions. (1) This also applies to the Luba who produced the Kasala.

In comparison, the Balu and the Fang have professional bards, veritable specialists who undergo a lengthy apprenticeship in order to acquire the epic patrimony transmitted by a master.

Similarly the griots of feudal societies constitute an endogamous caste, whose skill is passed down from father to son or nephew. Their art is learned within the family at first, and then perfected in the homes of other masters of the genre, with whom the apprentice pursues his quest during a period of several years, working in the fields by day, listening and learning by night.

(1) See Mr Tcheo's speech at the seminar on the epopee, colloquium of Yaounde, 1985.



Some researchers like Sory Camara, Christine Seydou, and Pierre Nguijol have observed these specialists in their practice and in their pursuits.

However, in spite of this long apprenticeship, the griot or the Mvet epic singer does not invent his narratives. He learns their basic structure, with set phrases which are the "fasa" or the "woi jaloore" in the Mandinka and Wolof epics and the mottoes in the clan epics. The refrains and the genealogies are also fixed parts.

But on these structure he embellishes. And here lies his talent. Should this be considered as improvisation? Yes and no.

In the Wolof epic or "epopee", the artist repeats texts already half-memorized. One comes to realize this when recording these texts at different periods.

The Bambara epic on the other hand can undergo varying developments with one and the same griot, depending on his humour or his motivations and according to his audience or the occasion. A systematic study should be made of this factor, by making successive recordings of the preservers of the African epic in each region where one or the other category of epic is concerned.

Be that as it may, for the moment we are almost inclined to sharing the opinion of Eno Belinga(1), a good Mvet critic, when he says that "the author of an oral literary work is the one who first introduced in public... he may be known in cases of recent works. It may also be that he belongs to a distant past, either directly (Homer) (sic) or indirectly by means of genealogy, legend or myth. Apart from such instances it is difficult, indeed impossible, to identify the originator of a literary work transmitted orally for generations".

For this reason we can say that in the majority of ancient traditional texts the author or authors remain unknown and the interpreters who repeatedly recompose on the same basic framework do so following a transmission of the text, but with the intention of accomplishing a performance. What does this performance consist in? One could say in the fidelity to the basic text and the original set phrases, as well as in the quality of the "open" parts during which the performer can give free rein to his imagination and vivacity of style.

Therefore, as one can see, this is a rather complex literary situation. Author, interpreter, or now one, now the other, in a same text...

Specialists of the Mvet also have a professional background which is quite as thorough as that of the griots of West Africa. They all claim kinship with the great initiate Oyono Ada Ngono to whom the Mvet was originally revealed... in a mythical time which is not specified. Thus, strictly speaking, it could be said that the author of the Mvet is this personage Oyono Ada Ngono. But did he really exist? Or is he like Orpheus or Hermes, just the symbol of a society of mysteries, as Eno Belinga suggests? Significantly if the initiation to the Mvet reveals to the apprentice "the genesis of genealogies, the affiliation of initiates who belong to a same tradition, the initiation to the history and geography of Engôn Zok and that of Oku(2), the shaping of all this material and the variants which follow the different schools of the Mvet tradition must be credited to the singer-creator, just as surely as the historical epic narratives of feudal societies can be.

This leads us to reconsider, in so far as Africa is concerned, the statement of J. Rychner according to which: "It is extremely difficult to believe in an oral composition for the Song of Roland; its transcription must have been extremely creative and indeed concurrent with a poetic act of creation(3)".

(1) Belinga - Comprendre la littérature orale, ed St. Paul, 1978, pp. 31-32.

(2) Belinga - L'épopée Camerounaise Mvet - refer to author, Yaounde.

(3) ~~M. de Riquer, op cit. p. 307~~

Jean Rychner - in La chanson de geste p 36 - Droz editor  
Geneva 1955



Elsewhere L. Gautier affirms, "we are today persuaded that our first epics did not, in reality, materially fuse together the preexisting cantilenas. They merely drew their inspiration from these popular songs ; they only borrowed from them the traditional and legendary elements ; they just took from them the ideas, the spirit and the life. And then all the rest was made up." (1)

This belief, that a poet creating orally does not have the intellectual resources to construct a very long and elaborate narrative like the epic, is shared by Riquer together with the assumption that only writing, reflection, and the deliberation involved make it possible to compose a literary work of some value.

This is to be expected of generations of medievalists who have never worked on texts other than in manuscript form.

The African epics on the contrary, make strikingly clear the possibility of oral composition in this complex genre, just as, moreover, there exists in Africa oral novels which are quite as long as the epics.

These civilizations built on the oral tradition have developed memorization techniques to an extremely refined degree, as well as those of improvisation and amplification on a theme or outline. These techniques are perfected once they become the apanage, indeed the "metier" of specialists.

At this point something happens which perhaps occurred in the time of King Arthur or the Charlemagne wars in a population which could boast very few learned men. The jongleurs, whose profession it was, may very well have composed more ample narratives, based on the popular songs of the day, to arrive at the epics that we know now and this before they were written down.

After all, the only certain evidence of written composition is perhaps the elements of rhyme or regular assonance, which is the case for the Turolodus Song of Roland, but not for the source from which Turolodus took his inspiration. There is also nothing to prove that this "geste Francor" was in Latin as Riquer believes. It could just as well have already existed in the popular Romanic tongue, in oral form, and Turolodus the scribe who polished it as he committed it to writing.

In addition we have instances in Africa when what could correspond to the cantilenas, that is the praise songs or panegyric poems, has not led to the epic or long narrative of heroic deeds from A to Z.

This is the case of the Kasala of the Kuba or of the famous Zulu Chaka.

The Kasala is a sequence of extremely long songs, also recited by specialists but in which the narrative element is subordinated to laudative evocation and allusions to facts known by the audience but which are never completely related. To the extent that C. Faik-Nzuji (2), who has collected and extensive corpus of these songs, is unable to make a definite statement when asked to do so. These are undoubtedly epic songs, but the true epic remains to be composed.

As regards the Chaka legend, mentioned above, the oral epic had not been created either when Mofolo took pen in hand.

Epic material in Africa therefore is found, according to the regions concerned, at different stages of elaboration and the reason for this remains to be examined.

To end this brief overview of the West African epic we must point out that <sup>two</sup> Occidental specialists of oral poetry, R. Finnegan and P. Zumthor, have underrated or mishandled it to a surprising degree.

(1) M. de Riquer, op. cit. p. 303.

(2) Mufuta, ed. Armand Colin, Paris

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R. Finnegan(1) goes so far as to doubt the existence of the epic in Africa and only acknowledges epic status in relation to the Myet when, in our opinion, the feudal epics are much closer to the European classical epics and therefore easier to identify.

Thus this view of R. Finnegan since 1971 appears to us to be totally indefensible. Paul Zumthor deals with this subject in two pages full of errors (pp. 120 and 121), plus a few allusions now and then, in his book on oral poetry(2). So much disregard for the epic patrimony of an entire continent seems to us quite as incomprehensible and unwarranted.

Isidore Okpewho has endeavoured to make up for such gaps in his work, The Epic in Africa(3), and though he does not as yet consider the extent of the diversities and scope of the epic phenomenon, he does succeed in demonstrating its value.

Finally, when one looks at the question of critics in relation to the African epic, it must be noted that so far the only critics who seem to know exactly what they are talking about are the African studies specialists who have worked on source materials. Among the first generation of scholars are the Reverend Father Biebuyk (Luba epic), Father Mveng and the late Stanislas Awouma (Myet), Herbert Pepper (also Mvet), A. Kagame, Coupez and d'Hertefeldt (Rwanda). In the second generation are Eno Belinga, Ndong Ndoutoume and Marcien Towa (again Mvet), Pierre Nguijol (Bassa epic), Christiane Seydou, Amadou Ly and Abel Sy (Peul and Toucouleur epics), Dumestre and Kesteloot (Bambara epics), Tamsir Niane, Massa Makan Diabate, Gordon Innes (Soundiata), Pathe Diagne and Bassirou Dieng (Wolof epic), J. P. Clark for the Ozidi, Thomas Hale for Sanyo, Charles Bird for the hunting epics, and here we must include the more theoretical, comparative study of I. Okpewho. It could be said that the African epic is ever awaiting its Dumezil and even its Gaston Paris while we are still at the Turolodus stage !

However, in defence of critics and researchers, let us admit that the corpus of oral epic literature, which is immense, has not been collected in its entirety and still less published. If each were to gather the different versions of the epic work, which he has brought to light, and do that alone, this would be a tremendous enterprise.

Each epic transmits a cultural universe so vast that the working life of one man could easily be engulfed, were he to accept to devote himself to such a task and to establish several versions, as should always be done, in order to do justice to the reality of the literary texture proper to each oral work with its multiple interpreters.

If studies on the epic have just started and if they are far behind those being carried out today on the African folktale, this is due rather to the complexity of the genre than to its immensity.

However the day will most certainly come when it will be possible to attempt more fundamental studies of the laws specific to African epic composition, of national or regional corpora, of the respective characteristics of the Sudanic and Central African corpora, and of the speculations about the African epic in relation to the epics of Europe, the Middle-East and Asia.

Finally the inexhaustible subjects for reflection on the relation the African epics to history, society, ideology and myth will be appreciated. Critics will then at last be able to give the considerable corpus of African epic literature its true eminence in world literature.

(1) R. Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, O.U.P., 1978.

(2) P. Zumthor, Essai sur la poésie orale, Seuil, 1984.

(3) I. Okpewho, The Epic in Africa, Columbia Uni. Press, 1979.

Askia Mohamed