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The Narrator as an Editor

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The Narrator as an Editor

Abstract
In 1970, when Ruth Finnegan published her ground-breaking book Oral Literature in Africa, she devoted extensive chapters to prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, and praise poetry. She did not neglect forms in African folklore that at the time were barely studied, such as children's songs and rhymes. But to the epic she allocated in her massive book of over 550 pages only two-and-a-half pages that she set aside at the conclusion of her chapter on "Poetry and Patronage" under the title "A Note on 'Epic'" (Finnegan 1970: 108-10). Probably having in mind the works of the Chadwicks and Bowra, she strikes a negative chord: "Epic is often assumed to be the typical poetic form of non-literate peoples, or at least non-literate peoples at a certain stage. Surprisingly, however, this does not seem to be borne out by the African evidence. At least in the more obvious sense of a 'relatively long narrative poem', epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa apart from forms like the (written) Swahili utenzi which are directly attributable to Arabic literary influence" (Finnegan 1970: 108). The reason for her inability to observe epic texts in sub-Saharan Africa was partially the mode of the textualization of the stories.

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The narrator as an editor

Dan Ben-Amos

The battle on epic in Africa

In 1970, when Ruth Finnegan published her ground-breaking book *Oral Literature in Africa*, she devoted extensive chapters to prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, and praise poetry. She did not neglect forms in African folklore that at that time were barely studied, such as children’s songs and rhymes. But to the epic she allocated in her massive book of over 550 pages only two-and-a-half pages that she set aside at the conclusion of her chapter on “Poetry and Patronage” under the title “A Note on ‘Epic’” (Finnegan 1970: 108-10). Probably having in mind the works of the Chadwicks and Bowra, she strikes a negative chord: “Epic is often assumed to be the typical poetic form of non-literate peoples, or at least non-literate peoples at a certain stage. Surprisingly, however, this does not seem to be borne out by the African evidence. At least in the more obvious sense of a ‘relatively long narrative poem’, epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa apart from forms like the (written) Swahili *utenzi* which are directly attributable to Arabic literary influence” (Finnegan 1970: 108). The reason for her inability to observe epic texts in sub-Saharan Africa was partially the mode of the textualization of the stories. She continues with her contrarian perspectives: “The term ‘epic’ appears in the title of several collections or discussions of African oral literature (perhaps partly because of the common expectation that it is likely to be a wide-spread art form). But almost all these works in fact turn out to be in prose, not verse – and often only brief prose tales at that.” After examining and dismissing a few possible cases that could have refuted her position she concludes: “All in all, epic poetry does not seem to be a typical African form” (Finnegan 1970: 110).

The presentation of the argument counters her own proposition, because at least one third of these two-and-a-half pages is devoted to meticulous annotations of either published or then forthcoming epic texts. Yet, repeatedly, also in the annotation she insists on verse as the only proper epic form of textualization. Arguing against Bascom, who suggested to consider the Lianja poem of the Nkundo people as epic, she points out that “examination of the actual text suggests that seven-eighths or more is in prose” (Finnegan 1970: 109, n. 9). In terms of this standard, indeed, the publication of *The Muindo Epic from the Banyanga* (Congo Republic), which Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo C. Mateene published a year earlier (1969), did not falsify her proposition. Except for the songs, they textualized the story as a prose narrative.
The narrator’s photo that appears on the dust jacket rather suggests a poetic performance, since the narrator accompanies himself with a rattler, but the literary presentation is in prose. Like most previous “so-called” epics that Ruth Finnegan examined, “The Mwindo Epic” measured up to the rhythm and meter of neither the Ancient Greek nor the Medieval Central and Northern European epics. Some years later Ruth Finnegan mused in personal conversation that “never have so few pages stimulated so much research”.

Indeed folklorists, anthropologists, and linguists set out to prove her wrong in field research and in theoretical analyses and bibliographical studies. John Johnson addressed her directly in the title of his article “Yes, Virginia, there is an Epic in Africa” (1980: 308–26) and proceeded to outline the epic-belt in Africa that stretched, with some gaps, from Central to Western, mainly francophone Africa. The epic map in Africa overlaps with French and Belgian colonial rule. In fact, his map suggests that the French had a special talent to discover epics in Africa. (He missed the Ibónia epic of Madagascar, which was available in French and recently appeared in English, see Haring 1994.)

In order to qualify a narrative as an epic, Johnson added criteria and suggested that the form of textualization is but one of several factors in such a consideration.

Isidore Okpewho’s The Epic in Africa (1975) took another approach to refute Finnegan’s proposition. He analyzed in detail seven narratives and pointed out that they met some thematic, structural and stylistic features that Albert Lord identified in the Yugoslavian epics, and through such a comparison could confirm the occurrence of the epic in Africa. Most recently Stephen Belcher provided a final blow to the theory of the missing epic in Africa. In an excellent analytical study, he demonstrates that the epic not only exists in Africa but that in the past twenty six years, since the publication of Ruth Finnegan’s work, it has been recorded, analyzed, studied and published (Belcher 1999).

Epic and nation

The battle over the epic has some ideological dimensions. Spirits would not have been stirred, I suspect, had Ruth Finnegan declared that, say, riddles are absent from the African continent. In fact when Archer Taylor stated in his classical study English Riddles from Oral Tradition (1951) that “riddles are said to be unknown to certain peoples, notably the Jews, the Chinese, and the American Indians” (Taylor 1951: 3; see also Taylor 1948: 37), none flinched an eye. Many years later, when the late poet Dan Pagis wrote about the Hebrew riddle in Italy and Holland, he addressed the issue in a footnote in a matter-of-fact way, pointing out that “Taylor’s review of the literature is full of errors that he inherited from previous scholars. Others who relied on Taylor
or on his sources, repeated and multiplied the mistakes because they drew upon secondary and tertiary sources” (Pagis 1986: 20, n. 21). None considered Archer Taylor anti-Semitic because he denied the Jews riddles, nor regarded the American Indians “The Ten Lost Tribes” because they share this feature with them. In this case as well new evidence showed Taylor wrong but none considered his assertion an affront to the spirit of the nations of the Native Americans (Scott 1963: 236–41).

But the epic is another matter. Giambattista Vico laid the foundation for the connection between epic and nation. In the chapter on “The Discovery of the True Homer” in his New Science he came to the conclusion, allegorizing the burial-place legends of Homer, that the Homeric epics embody the spirit of the Greek nation (Vico 1984: 301–28; see also Binney 1969: 259–78). With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, and the rekindling of nationalistic spirit in the twentieth century, the existence of an epic in the body of a literature has become a matter of national pride, as if a nation requires an epic to prove its cultural “worthiness”. The battle over the epic among the Ancient Hebrews raged in a similar way. (Cross 1973; Jason 1979; Talmon 1981.) As if it was not enough for a small group of people, living on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to add the Bible to our humanistic and religious heritage, national pride motivated scholars and lay persons alike to uncover an epic between its lines as well.

The identification of the epic with the nation, however, casts a shadow over the individual narrator and performer. Mikhail Bakhtin pits the individual against the nation in his conceptualization of the epic. The second of his three “constitutive features” sets the contrast in clear terms: “The epic as a genre in its own right may, for our purpose, be characterized by... (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic” (Bakhtin 1981: 13). Later he elaborates, stating that “by its very nature the epic world of absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation. The important thing is... its reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on commonly held evaluation and point of view – which excludes any possibility of another approach – and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition” (Bakhtin 1981: 16–17).

The textualization of Edo epics

On a broad general thematic literary level Bakhtin’s formulation could have served as a valuable model for the epics in Africa, but their performance and the textualization, particularly when the narrator’s interpretation becomes
known, challenges the fundamentals of Bakhtin’s view, and therefore requires rethinking of the triadic relations of epic, nation, and tradition.

In 1966 I studied the oral tradition of the Edo people of Nigeria in Edo (Benin City) and its rural environs. Among other storytellers whom I talked to, observed and recorded, Iditua of Urhokosa village was a recognized master narrator who told narratives of epical dimension, and whose rendition of two such epics, “Agboghidi” and “Odologie”, named after their principal figures, I recorded. This was the first time that the story of “Odologie” has ever been brought to the attention of an outsider, and I could surmise that even within Edo society, it is not well known. The hero’s name appears in Jacob Egharevba, A Short History of Benin (1934), in a list of princes and princesses who rule the Edo after the death of Ere, the last Ogiso, the first royal dynasty. Otherwise, neither his name nor the stories of his actions recur in tradition. But the story of Agboghidi has had a different literary history. While it has not yet received the recognition it deserves in world literature, it has been textualized twice: the first time as an epic measured in pentameter, so rendered by John Wyndham and published as The Curse of Obo in 1926. Wyndham heard the story from Prince Aiguobasimwin, the eldest son of Oba Ovonramwen, who was deposed and exiled from Benin when the British army destroyed the city in 1897. Prince Aiguobasimwin, later Oba Eweka the second (1914–33), told the story in 1911, before his father’s death and his own ascension to the throne, but while he was a warrant chief of Benin. Wyndham puts the story in the mouth of a personified Forest talking to an Englishman. The opening verses are indicative of his literary handwork:

The Forest of Benin speaks to an Englishman: –
These many evenings, Stranger, I have watched
Your patient quest of dead kings’ halls, while I –
My mother-grief still sore – have screened from view
The ravished remnants of a bygone Power. (Wyndham 1926: 9.)

The second time the story of Agboghidi appeared in press it was in an adolescent book of folktales prepared by Joseph E. Sidahome, Stories of the Benin Empire (1964), which was published posthumously. Sidahome’s brief biographical sketch that appears on the dust jacket recounts a life of an aspiring young man. He was born in Owaha, Ishan, in 1917 and lived with his parents in several Midwestern towns in Nigeria, Ubiaja, Benin City and Ondo. At thirteen he moved in with his uncle, who lived in Lagos and later moved to Owerri and Port Harcourt. At nineteen he entered St. Mary’s School, Port Harcourt, and later the Christ the King College in Onitsha. After entering the civil service, he went to London to study law at King’s College, London University. After passing Part I LL. B. and Part I Bar, funds failed him and he had to go out to work. Shortly after this he became paralysed and died in
July 1963. It appears that he intended the book to provide him some source of income to complete his studies.

Joseph E. Sidahome was a native of Ishan, a people which is linguistically related, yet distinct from the Edo, whose territory is North-East of Benin. He points out, in the information provided on the dust jacket rather than in the book itself, that the narrators from whom he heard the stories accompanied themselves on the akpata, a lute-harp, like the Edo narrators do. At the same time he offers a term for the epic, Ulogo, a long story, a generic category and a word that does not occur in modern Edo language. Obviously, in spite of the fact that Sidahome geared his rendition to a young readership, thematically his texts are invaluable. Yet, their textualization hardly offers us any notion of the oral narration in either Ishan or Benin.

Sidahome's book appeared in 1964, but I did not learn about it until shortly before I traveled to Nigeria. Neither this book, nor previous scholarship on the Edo people, which by that time was quite extensive, could have prepared me for the discovery of epic narratives and their narrators among the Edo. The superb anthropological studies of R. E. Bradbury (1973), who conducted field research for nine years from 1951 to 1960, and who covered, it so appeared, every aspect of Edo life, do not offer a clue to the existence of an epic narrative tradition. This omission is particularly amazing because, as it later turned out, we shared an informant. The master storyteller who told me the epics of "Agboghidi" and "Odologie" was also a village priest for the cult of Ovia. He enabled Bradbury to watch some of the secret rituals and offered him some basic information about the cult, yet all that time Bradbury was not aware, at least neither his published works nor his fieldnotes, now at deposit in the rare book collection of the University of Birmingham, give any indication that he tapped in any way the verbal abilities of the priest of Ovia.

Textualizing the Agboghidi epic

When I arrived in Benin, I began to ask for master narrators. The immediate response was that none existed at that time, only in the past, but after persistent inquiries I was led to Iditua. Still I did not know what to expect. We made arrangements for him to come to Benin City and tell a story at the compound of chief Ogiamwen. He chose to tell the history of "Agboghidi". He began his story as evening fell, and at dawn he informed me that he had not finished and that I should come at another time to hear the conclusion.

At that time, two months into my stay in Benin, my knowledge of Edo was rudimentary. I could not follow, nor could even attempt to, the rapid speech in a tone language. Later I learned that some phrases, terms, and expressions, even his regular listeners could not fully decipher. Spell-bound
by a familiar plot, the listeners resigned to the fact that master narrators use idioms that they neither recognize nor fully comprehend. They accept, and sometime are fascinated by the mysterious aspect of language. Obscurity has, as Chukwuma Azuonye noted in his study of Igbo performances, aesthetic value (Azuoney 1990). The Edo people name the aesthetics of linguistic mystery: Edo divi, "deep Edo". The metaphor attributing profundity to language is analogous to its use in English, and occurs in reference, say, to a river. In Edo a speaker describes a deep river as eze divi.

After completing the recording that lasted on tape ten-and-a-half hours, I had my assistant Robinson Ahanon, a native speaker, transcribe the text, and ten years later, when my proficiency in Edo improved, and the Biafra war ended, I returned to Nigeria to translate and interpret the text. "Deep Edo" might have an aesthetic value, but in analysis and translation, none would appreciate it unless it is resolved. I still needed an assistant to help me decipher the flow of the text and explain words, even those that were not considered profound. A short time into my work I learned, the hard way, the service and disservice assistants can provide. My assistant at that time, Musa Yesufo, was faithful and reliable most of the time. In working on the translation he did not want to disappoint me whenever we came upon obscure words, nor did he wish me to consider him incompetent. Out of his desire to please and to maintain face, he therefore offered possible translations in spite of the fact that sometimes the text did not make any sense. As my knowledge of the language improved, I could detect suggestions that intended to smooth out difficulties rather than to expose the complexity, or obscurity of meaning.

The individual element

At that point, translating the text often meant a second round of fieldwork. I would seek out elders of the community and other knowledgeable individuals who would be able to shed light on Iditua’s phrasing. But on some occasions even they were not helpful and I had to turn to Iditua himself to explain himself. His interpretations illuminated the personal dimension of a national epic, and brought in the world of the individual narrator as it textually interacts with the exposition of history and social life.

The performance text consists of three types of verbal delivery: prose narration, measured speech, and songs. The plot unfolds in prose. The measured speech serves as transitory interludes: some of them remain within the narrative plot, some present the narrator’s meta-commentary upon the characters or allow him to interject his own personal experience into the story. The songs are again of two kinds: songs the characters sing within the plot, and others that the narrator chants to relieve the audience of the monotony into which their verbal performance may slide.
Within one of the interludes of measured speech Iditua said the following:

I da tie erha mwen n'erha mwen
Aituauwa n'erha mwen. Oluku esin iyoyo n'erah mwen.
Eiuwasegie n'iye mwen.
Iye mwen n'ada ze uwa, ada ze gha la umodia, a ve ghe ere.

Iditua gives his listeners a clue to the meaning of this phrase. The first line means: "I want to recall my own father." Erha mwen "my father" is an honorific address to a senior man. During my fieldwork I addressed Iditua and other elder people with this phrase. But at this point Iditua uses references to his father with an emphatic idiom that indicates he is referring to his own father, not a simple erha mwen, but erha mwen n'erha mwen, the quintessential father, that is his own father. Nevertheless, because names are such a personal matter in Edo society, often kept secret, neither the listeners nor my assistants nor anyone else who listened to the tape could identify in the next phrase the narrator's father's name and consequently guessed all kinds of meanings and interpreted the rest of the sentence accordingly. But once we played the tape to Iditua and he told us what he said, everything fell into place: "Aituauwa my father, the piglet tassel of my father." The evocation and the metaphor recall family intimacy that is completely in the confines of the narrator's private memory. He explained that he alluded to his childhood memory of being held by his father in his arms, recalling the softness of his beard – a beard that has the softness of piglet skin.

Next he mentions his mother by name Eiuwasegie. Her name, as many other Edo names, is proverbial: "Wealth is not better than chieftaincy." The negation is the prefix for the name, ei, "it is not". The following verse is a play on his mother's name: "My mother, who at the crossroads selected wealth, at the crossroads selected the straight line, we recall looking at her." Iditua's mother's name was part of his personal knowledge that no audience could share. As he was a man in his sixties when I recorded him, there were probably few people in his own village who knew his parents, let alone their names. Poverty bothered Iditua and became like a motif in his personal commentary in his performance. The recollection of his mother is both ironic and full of personal respect. Her choice of "wealth" is ironic – it is only in her name rather than life. Yet in spite of her poverty she maintained the "straight line", a dignified life.

There are few other instances in which I resorted to the narrator as an editor. In folklore studies such a method would be accepted and respected like mother and apple pie in American culture. But it is not the methodological issues which are at stake here, but the basic idea of the epic as a narrative of the "absolute past" that Goethe and Schiller conceptualized and which Bakhtin recently resurrected. The distancing of the epic into a remote and
unapproachable past is an act that misunderstanding and convenience often generate. But when the narrator is introduced into the process of interpretation and explication, the performance of the epic becomes very much part of the present.

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