

Isidore Okpewho. *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. xvii, 288 pp. \$16.50.

When Ruth Finnegan published her book *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), out of five hundred and fifty-eight pages she devoted only two and half pages to the epic, and even these were negative. "All in all," she wrote, "epic poetry does not seem to be a typical African form. . . . Certain elements of epic also come into many other forms of poetry and prose. But in general terms and apart from Islamic influences, epic seems to be of remarkably little significance in African oral literature, and the *a priori* assumption that epic is the natural form for many non-literate peoples turns out here to have little support" (p.110). While Finnegan's book was in general well received, it was her relatively minor "Notes on the Epic" (pp. 108-110) that actually stirred controversy and stimulated discussion. The present study by Isidore Okpewho is the first book length response to Finnegan's challenge.

Much of the preliminary research on the currently available African epic poetry had been completed by the end of the sixties, when Finnegan wrote her book. In the decade that followed the epic texts began to appear in print, sufficiently so for Okpewho to present conclusive evidence that indeed there is, *contra* Finnegan, epic poetry in Africa. In his study he relies primarily, though not exclusively, on English versions of African epics that were edited by and translated by Biebuyck and Matenee, Bird, J. P. Clark, Innes, and Niane.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars who published their work in French like Pepper and de Wolf, and Seydou<sup>3</sup> could have provided additional epics that would have yielded support to Okpewho's thesis.

Okpewho, however, does not stop at presenting the evidence. Rather he attempts an analytical discussion, but unfortunately in doing so he flounders between two different perspectives. On the one hand, as the subtitle of the book indicates, he intends to study the epic within the framework of the poetics of oral performance. On the other hand, as he describes his work in the preface, this is a "comparative study of the oral epic" (xi). Between the poetics and the comparison falls the analysis.

In terms of organization and exposition of ideas the main thrust of the book is comparative. Okpewho divides his discussion into four chapters on "The Resources of the Oral Epic," "The Hero: His Image and His Relevance," "On Form and Structure," and "Elements of the Oral Narrative Style." In each chapter he identifies relevant features and demonstrates their prevalence in several African epics; at the

1. For other discussions see Daniel Biebuyck, "The African Heroic Epic," in Felix J. Oinas, ed. *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Epics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 336-367, and John W. Johnson, "Yes Virginia, There Is An Epic in Africa," paper presented at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting, Salt Lake City, November 1978.

2. Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo C. Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga (Congo Republic)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Charles Bird, et al. *The Songs of Seydou Camera: Volume 1: Kambili* (Bloomington: Indiana University African Studies Center, 1974); J. P. Clark, *The Ozidi Saga* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1977); Gordon Innes, *Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1974); and D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: an Epic of the Old Mali* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965).

3. Herbert Pepper and Paule de Wolf, *Un mvet de Zwè Nguéma: chant épique Fang*. *Classique Africains* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972); Christiane Seydou, *Silàmaka & Poullòri: récit épique Peul*. *Classiques Africains* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972).

same time he shows their existence in the classical Homeric as well as the more recently recorded Balkan epic narratives. Implicit in such an exposition is an external-comparative definition of the epic. The classical epic poems are the models and the epic quality of African examples depends upon their approximation to these ancient narratives.

Nowhere does Okpewho state this assumption explicitly. In his conclusion he contends that he has made the comparisons between the African and the Homeric traditions only "because the numerous parallels between them are too close to be overlooked" (p. 241). However, later on he is apologetic that there is not an even greater similarity between the African and the Greek epics, as if such a resemblance is essential. He states: "No attempt has, of course, been made to establish an irrefutable one-to-one correspondence between *one* Homeric epic (for example the *Iliad*) and *one* African (for example *Kambili*); that would be pointless exercise. No sensible scholar of the epic will contend that any tradition of the oral epic is exactly like the Homeric, for the obvious reasons of cultural differences" (p. 241).

This is a misplaced apology. It is an error to argue against those 'non-sensible scholars' who would accept the existence of the epic in Africa only if it resembles the classical epic point by point. By even considering such an approach, and thus revealing some of the underlining assumptions of his comparative analysis, Okpewho bites the bait that nineteenth century comparative anthropologists dangled, albeit he does so from the opposite end. Frazer compared the African, Oceanic and American peoples to the Greeks and the Romans, demonstrating their common "primitiveness." Okpewho turns the tables upon such theories and utilizes comparisons with classical epics only in order to elevate the African oral epic and legitimize it as literature.

But the literariness of African verbal art does not depend upon its similarities or differences with other literary traditions. Rather, it is possible to discern its aesthetic qualities, as the African peoples do, by relating epics to other forms of communication in culture and to the language of other verbal performances. The poetics of the African epic, in other words, has its basis in the poetic system of each culture. However, the preoccupation with comparisons diverts Okpewho's attention from cultural ethno-poetic systems, of which the performance of epic is a part. He deals with such questions only in terms of the Parry-Lord formulaic theory of epic recitation and composition, and the subsequent scholarship in this trend. By following such a narrow notion of the concept of the poetics of performance Okpewho misses important developments in literary and folkloristic methods and theories about narrative performance. Conveniently these new research directions have been critically presented by Richard Bauman in his article "Verbal Art as Performance," *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975), 290-311.<sup>4</sup> Okpewho would have found in this research direction concepts and ideas that would have supported his own effort to present the African epic as an art form.

Unfortunately such an omission of relevant recent scholarship is not an isolated case. For example, Okpewho opens his books with an introductory chapter on traditional African art in general. He tries to rescue both verbal and visual arts from the claws of anthropologists who, allegedly, regard them solely in religious or

4. An expanded version of this article together with additional studies by other authors appeared in Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1977).

ritualistic terms. However, in his plea for aesthetic considerations of the arts of Africa Okpewho constructs a straw man that was burnt to ashes years ago. Suffice it to mention in this connection the articles of Robert F. Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance," *African Forum* 2,ii (1966), 85-102, and Charles Bird, "Poetry in the Mande: its Form and Meaning," *Poetics* 5 (1976), 89-100. Similarly, the analysis of the hero and his image in the epic could have benefitted from Lord Raglan's book *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1936) or at least Archer Taylor's short essay "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1946), 114-120. It would not have been necessary to employ some of the more formal models that appear in these works, and to which Okpewho apparently objects. But such studies could have offered analytical methods which would have strengthened the case of the epic in Africa. The appearance of such studies in anthropological and folkloristic journals should not serve as a reason for their omission by an author who wishes to offer a literary analysis of the epic. As far as verbal art is concerned, disciplinary lines are only hurdles to overcome, not fences to defend a territory.

In conclusion, in this book Okpewho has definitely established the evidence for the existence of the epic form in Africa, and he has done so without several methods and approaches that are currently available. How much stronger would his case have been had he only broadened his analytical base?

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M. H. Ross and B. K. Walker. "On Another Day . . ." *Tales Told among the Nkundo of Zaire*. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1979. 596 pp. \$35.00.

Nkundo (or Mongo) oral art is famous. The main published collections in Mongo with French or Dutch translations contain c.650 tales and the volumes are well annotated. But so far the English speaking reader could consult only a collection of some twenty-five texts<sup>1</sup> which is marginal in several respects. This new set of ninety-five tales at least gives specimens of the different types of tales, including a portion of the most famous epic tale *Lianja*. It does not however include Mongo texts and, apart from explanatory notes, the tales are discussed only for their types and motifs.

A long introduction precedes the texts and that is preceded by a foreword of D. J. Crowley. In all of this the sketch of Mongo life by M. H. Ross is the best part. The tales themselves follow in four chapters: one about cosmogony, including a portion of *Lianja* (tale two), one with animal tales, including specimens of both the antelope (*mboloko*) and tortoise cycles, one with tales involving people, including "ogre" tales, and one with dilemma tales. No major category of Mongo story telling is omitted and the serious student can find at least one corresponding volume for each chapter in the publications of the *Académie royale des sciences d'Outre-Mer* or in the annals of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Belgium). He will use this book's chapters as mere introductions. The more general reader will find it a fair, adequately annotated, sample of Nkundo tales. Nevertheless it is inexcusable not to have included a Mongo text with tone and ideophone, so that the reader comes at least somewhat closer to the

1. A. Cobble, *Wembi, the Singer of Stories*, St. Louis, 1959.