The Epic as Work Poetry: A Case Study of the Tradition of Ita among the Anambra Igbo Fisherfolk

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UNTIL the explosion of epic scholarship in Africa and elsewhere in the world outside Europe, a common assumption among scholars interested in the genre, was that the epic was an aristocratic genre, exclusively concerned with the doings of kings, princes and other characters of the aristocratic class. Outmoded opinions of this kind can still be found in certain isolated nooks in the world of learning where some phenocentric scholars have barricaded themselves clutching tenaciously to ancient fallacies. From Africa and the rest of the world, we have come to the understanding that the epic is indeed a universal and popular genre which exists in many different forms and modes, the appeal of which cuts across social classes and the themes of which encompass all reality — the phenomenal and the imaginative as well as the realistic and the fantastic. The griots of Senegal, Mali and the Gambia, who perform the Sunjata¹ and other magnificent epics such as Kambili², are as much at home in the courts of kings and wealthy notables as they are on the streets and other public arena, among the ordinary folk. Among the Tamil of Sri Lanka (Ceylon)³, the epic is so much concerned with the doings of peasants that, for some scholars, it might appear, in that particular socio-cultural context, to be a distinctively peasant form of art. Among the Tamil of Sri Lanka (Ceylon)³, the epic is so much concerned with the doings of peasants that, for some scholars, it might appear, in that particular socio-cultural context, to be a distinctively peasant form of art. The same is true of the oral epic songs of the Ohafia Igbo of the Cross River area of Southern Nigeria⁴ — a powerful tradition which is indeed exclusively concerned with the doings of peasant heroes and whose performers and audiences alike are peasants — farmers, traders, artisans, medicinemen, housewives, etc.

But despite the realization that the epic is a more universal and popular genre than was originally supposed, the genre is still widely seen primarily as a ceremonial type of leisure-time entertainment which nevertheless fulfils certain serious socio-cultural functions. This is yet another fallacy which needs to be resolved in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the nature of the primary oral epic in some truly traditional societies.

In this article, an attempt will be made to show — with reference to a living epic tradition, known as ita, among the fishing and agricultural Igbo people of the Omabala (i.e. Anambra) river valley in the Anambra State of Nigeria — that there are some societies where, under certain conditions, the epic may flourish and function as a species of work poetry, i.e. as a poetic performance which provides entertainment during work, helping to relieve the tedium of work. Nor is this association with work merely contextual. In the Anambra epics to be discussed in this article, work also constitutes a dominant theme and the heroes presented are culture heroes whose actions are associated with the origins, evolution and entrenchment in the culture of the peoples work ethics as well as their major arts and technology. Furthermore, the apprenticeship and training of the performers of the epics take place in the course of work (fishing or farming) and most performers see their performances as work.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the relationships between the Anambra Igbo
Ordinarily, the word *ita* refers to any fantastic tale in the oral tradition which purports to be a true account of past events. It is, in other words, a species of romance and like all romance, it combines elements of the traditional fabular tale with those of myth and legend. *Ita* however differs from romance of the European type in its exclusion of love and chivalry and its greater emphasis on the heroic labours of men specially created or born to serve their societies. Thus in the three epics recorded so far in the Anambra area, we are confronted with the heroic labours of three such men, all gargantuan heroes supported by certain supernatural aides. In *Ameke Okoye*, the hero fights and destroys 20 or more monsters arrayed against his community with the aid of his witchgrandmother, Emembolu, his bard, Nnabuluede and the Almighty God, Chukwu. In some versions he dies in a final encounter with a monster called Ika-pulu-enyi-n'isi while in others he walks back victoriously to spirit-land or disappears without trace after the completion of his earthly mission. In *Ozoemene Ndive* (an excerpt from which is published in this issue of *Black Orpheus*), the precocious hero disturbs the habitat of some terrible monsters when he clears a large tract of territory on which he plans to farm in order to relieve his people of hunger. The rest of the epic is the story of the seven-year flight of Ozoemene from one of these monsters, Nduye Nduye. In the course of the flight he comes into contact with skills and knowledge which ultimately become the general property of the folk. In *Ojaadili Udeoba*, the hero is a great wrestler born of a virgin married in far away Iduu Kamerum. His is a revenge and revolutionary mission. He de-thrones and enslaves a wicked king who before his (The hero’s) birth insists on plucking a tooth from Udeoba on each of his festivities. Thereafter, he establishes large-scale farms for the benefit of the masses. An Utopian socialist order comes into being; his earthly mission accomplished, he ascends into heaven flanked by two of his disciples.

Each of these epics is a highly elaborate poetic narrative which usually takes many days to perform. The performances recorded by us in the field in September 1983 lasted from 3 to 4 days. They are usually ceremonial and theatrical, often featuring music, choric accompaniment, histrionics and sometimes dance. In its combination of the legendary, the poetic, the narrative and the heroic elements with length of performance, the Anambra *ita* is clearly a species of epic, but because of the predominance of fabulous elements in it, it may be described as *romantic* epic. I have elsewhere distinguished this romantic type of epic from its diametrically-opposed counterpart in the Igbo oral tradition, viz the *historic epic* exemplified by the oral epic songs of Ohafia. Whereas the historic epic presents historical or true-to-life characters, situations, actions and setting usually delineated by means of particularized epithets and focus formulas, the romantic epic presents fabulous and far-fetched characters, etc. delineated by romantic hyperbole, a special type of hyperbole which involves superlative exaggeration deliberately contrived to create an eerie atmosphere of other worldly fantasy. This core element of the romantic epic may be observed in its most unabashed luxuriance in the following excerpt from the epic of Ozoemene Ndive. It is, in fact, a double-edged device which while distancing the world of heroes from the ordinary phenomenal world (by its bold exaggeration) also creates a rapprochement between the heroes and the audience by its constant reference to places and things in the immediate local environment. Thus, for example, the length of the extraordinary
As soon as this was settled,
Individuals began to donate barns of yams
For the feeding of Emeka, son of Okoye.
Altogether, no less that six persons
Donated a barn each on the spot,
For the women to come and collect
And cook for the feeding of their giant.
And so it was that Work started in earnest:
While men carried out the yams from the barns of the donors.
Women set out peeling and cooking them.
At the same time, four young men
Were specially sent out with Emeka
In search of a big body of water
To which Emeka would go whenever he was thirsty
And felt like drinking Water.
Far away, the search party found a lake
Called “Agbu”, the soundless deep,
This they showed Emeka and told him
To go there to drink.
Emeka thanked them and asked
Whether he could drink at once.
They told Emeka that he was free
To drink if he wanted to drink.
Then Emeka opened his huge mouth
At one side of the lake and started to drink —
*Fuuu dum! Fuuu dum!*
As his breath and throat echoed
The drinking and swallowing of the water,
The whole body of Water rushed
Into his mouth like water flowing out
Of a damaged dam.
This continued until he noticed that
What he now had in his mouth was only sand,
Evidence that the whole water had been drunk.
He spat out the sand pail!
And the water creatures now exposed
Rolled and jumped about
For lack of water in their bed:
Hippotamus, seacows, crocodiles and fishes of all kinds
Became exposed on the bed of the lake, now dry,
Then the four escorts went back
And told Adaja people their experience
And in particular that of the water creatures,
They asked those who had matchets, spears and guns
To come with their weapons for a general fish harvest
On the bank of the lake Emeka dried up by drinking,
All the people of Adaja went for fish killing and gathering
Until everybody's basket was full,

*(Ezinando, 1978: 36)*

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