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The Romantic Epics of the Anambra Igbo

by CHUKWUMA AZUONYE

Our attention has been drawn to the existence of a powerful tradition of oral epic literature among the fishing and agricultural communities of Nando, Agu-leri and Anam, in the Omabala river basin of the Anambra State of south-eastern Nigeria. The purpose of this article is to discuss the major heroic tales or epics recorded or known to exist in this little-known tradition with a view to ascertaining their generic characteristics and their place in the larger heritage of oral epic literature in Igboland in particular and in Africa in general.

In his report of an investigation carried out in his home town, Nando, Ezinando focuses on the epic of Ameka Okoye as performed over a period of five nights by Osita Ajaana, a non-professional but specialist amateur artist, who lives and works as a yam farmer in Illah in Bendel State. The hero of this highly elaborate narrative, which forms part of a corpus of fantastic tales known as 'ita', is a gargantuan who clearly belongs to the archetypal and mythical age of giants, monsters and magicians. The grandson of a fearsome witch, Emembolu, whose name means 'Revenge' and who throughout the tale acts as one of the hero's supernatural 'props', Ameka Okoye is conceived in extraordinary circumstances after a long period of barrenness on the part of his mother, Mbaago. His birth also takes place in extraordinary circumstances after an unusually long pregnancy of 39 years! The duration of the pregnancy is different in different versions of the epic. At birth, the hero is fully mature and so huge that it requires the collaboration of the entire population of his home town of Adaja to feed him and supply his needs in other respects. For water, he drinks straight from rivers and lakes, often draining the whole source dry in one draught. Not surprisingly, Ameka Okoye grows up a prodigy, joining other heroes at a very early age but quickly surpassing them all in heroic exploits.

In his prime, Ameka Okoye engages and overcomes a succession of monsters, arrayed against his people and their land, in 20 major and three minor encounters. The fiercest are those in which he engages 'Nwaanyakalu-obi', 'The-hard-hearted-woman' (encounter No. 1), 'Ebudeve-dike-ogwugwu', 'The-one-that-lives-in-the-sky-and-torments-the-earth' (No. 9), 'Anjekwe-onwu', 'Earth-that-would-not-die' (No. 13), 'Oba-n-Iduu', 'The-king-of-Iduu' (No. 14), 'Ajaka', 'The-one-that-brings-bad-luck' (No. 19), and 'Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi', 'Nature-on-the-head-of-the-elephant' (No. 20). In the last, which takes place when Ameka appears to have completed his mission on earth, he dies while being swallowed by 'Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi' who also perishes in the struggle. Ezinando gives a vivid and dramatic description of this final fatal encounter:

Emeka died together with his antagonist in the number twenty encounter. The... antagonist has the same personal god, 'Amoge', with Emeka. This fact is unknown to both of them. Each of them has an equally powerful witch grandmother. But Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi happened to be bigger in size than Emeka. During their fights, the metaphysical groups on both sides... desert each of them. Then Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi started swallowing Anjemeka. Emeka was half-swallowed and half of him remained outside the mouth of Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi which also led to the death of Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi. When Nnabuluede (Emeka's bard) ran back home to report the incident to Emembolu, he found out that Emembolu had also died at the very time Emeka died.

Similarly, Ika-pulu-enyi-n-isi's witch grandmother dies simultaneously with her grandson. Thus, in the end, a state of complete equilibrium is reached in which the exuberant forces of nature represented by the two gargantuan heroes and their supernatural props are laid to rest and natural harmony is restored to the world. However, in other versions of the epic recorded from different narrators, Ameka Okoye does not die: he simply walks back home to the land of spirits or disappears without leaving any trace, like many similar heroes in the epic literatures and myths of southern Nigeria. Ameka Okoye is only one of several examples of this kind of fantastic epic narrative in the oral tradition of the Anambra Igbo. In two field investigations undertaken in April 1982 and August-September 1983 by
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Neither the Owoa nwa Obot epic nor any of the other three have been recorded; all we know of the latter now is that they are about beautiful ladies and princes. The actual texts, when recorded may, however, prove to be even more fascinating than is suggested by this bland description.

The epics we already have share a number of truly fascinating features. First of all, each is a very elaborate and lengthy epic of the Igbo. Second, the amnesia of most of the stories is so widespread that the songs or the last known fragment of the story are so extensive as to make it possible for the story to be transmitted orally for a remarkable number of years.
The Romanic Epic of the Amurabi Jogo

Ishigaki Sanki

The romantic epic of the Amurabi Jogo, which deals with the famous heroic mythological world inhabited by giants, monsters, and magicians. The Erik, or the men of the world, are a pet of the epics, and their adventures are narrated by the narrator, who is often a wise old man or a wise woman. The epic is a form of oral literature, and its themes and motifs are often passed down from generation to generation.

In the epic, the hero is a young man who is chosen by the gods to undertake a series of quests. He is aided by a group of companions, who are often chosen from among the local inhabitants of the area. The hero's journey is often filled with danger and hardship, and he must overcome many obstacles in order to complete his mission.

The epic also contains a number of moral and ethical lessons, which are often taught through the actions of the hero and his companions. These lessons are often related to themes of courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice.

The narrative structure of the epic is often complex, and it may involve multiple subplots and characters. The epic may also contain elements of magic and the supernatural, which are often used to create a sense of wonder and mystery.

The Amurabi Jogo is one of the most famous and influential epics in the Japanese literature. It has been translated into many languages and has been adapted into plays, films, and other forms of popular culture.
Chukwuma Anuyoke

and giving them to her cowardly husband who is unable to meet the all-important social requirement of the heroic age – winning the head of an alien in battle, ambush or single combat. In the 'descriptive epithets', heroes and groups are presented in terms of their peculiar physical or psychological attributes. Thus in the following epithets – 'Olibaruzaka-Oso-ógba', 'Hunchback-that-runs-faster-than-his-peers' and 'Nde-akpa-ngwuru-leghe-ewu', 'people-that-rear-lizards-like-goats' – we have vivid impresions of the hero and of the distinctive totemic characteristic of the local community mentioned. In the 'associative epithets', with their genitalia metrices ('mother of', 'son of' etc.), we get a sense of the network of genealogical and other significant links between heroes and heroes, groups and groups, and between heroes and the groups to which they belong. A few of the three types of epithets described above are generalized, for example, the common description of brave warriors everywhere in the epics as 'diégbeji-égbé-egbúhùgá-áwóyé', 'Wizard-of-guns-for-whom-the-gem-is-a-playing', but most are particularized, being frozen images of the heroic qualities of various individuals and groups handed down by tradition from what appear to be actual folk observations of their achievements, attributes and associations. They are thus a powerful instrument for realistic heroic characterisation.

Realism is not the aim of the romantic epic. In aim is to create an eerie other-worldly atmosphere, a dreamlike vision removed from the world of observable phenomena. The primary means by which this is achieved is the use of a superficial form of overstatement which we may call the 'romantic hyperbole'. A look at the epithets used in the catalogue of heroes in the encounter between Ameke Okoye and Ewuljirin will show how the conception of the hero differs from that contained in the Ogbodo Igbo historical epic. One hero is described as 'he that uses the human thigh-bone as chewing-stick', while another is described as 'the one the hair on whose body is like spikes'. These are, of course, impossible – unlike what happens in the historical epic in which everything is kept within natural proportions.

Quite often, in the Anambra epics, the romantic hyperbole features in the description of weapons, heroes and monsters in the form of far-fetched similes such as the examples printed in italics in the following passage from Ozoemene Nkwo.

And so Ozoemene reached the age of seven from the time he was born, And he saluted his mother and his father And they replied to him. And he said to them: 'You will have to forge a hoe and machete for me; With this hoe and machete you will forge for me, I will go and lease a piece of land on which to work, Because hunger is troubling our people.' His father Nkolubora agreed with his son. Told him that what he said was good; But do not farm for me, The one I do is enough to sustain us; that you are so very handworn It is enough. But he said that it was not true. And so they went to forge that machete for him. If you see that machete, The length of that machete was like Stretching from here up to our village square. And he said to them: 'Is it only this little knife for chopping palmfruits that you have?' Spectator: [Laughter] Narrator: Told him to go and make him a machete. So they set out for Oka. In those olden days, Oka was famous for smithing. Oka controlled all our technical know-how. When the white man had not yet come, It was at Oka that we saw about machete-making, It was at Oka that we knew about that kind of work in which we fish. That time when the white man had not yet come. So they went and called the people of Agalu Oka Told them that Ozoemene Said that they should forge a hoe – Told them that all Oka smiths working together will have to forge that machete For it to be well forged. The King of Oka called him. He answered him. He asked him: 'This your son, Ozoemene, How big is he?' He said to him: 'You have heard of him with your ears, But you will soon see him with your eyes.' Told him 'Do the thing for which you are known as Oka Is the machete about to be forged.' Oka people told him to go, 'Told him that the machete about to be forged Would be forged for two market weeks.' And so they went on forging that Ozoemene's machete, And they went on and on for two market weeks. The length of this machete I am talking about now Is like going from here up to Opiwugó. Spectator: [Heehee] Narrator: People of Aguleri, I salute you! Spectators: Welcome! Narrator: People said it was good: 'Dear Ozoemene, That machete has been forged for you.'

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And so that machete was carried home. When people looked at that machete, the width of that machete Was like going from here up to Opiwugó. Which means that not even two hundred men could lift it up. Ozoemene gazed at it; Then he went and took it in his own hands and began to sharpen it – Sharpened it, sharpened it up to the hilt. Then he said to them: 'You have done very well.' And he said to his people, Told them that he had gone out something like two Sundays ago. That he was casting about for where he would work, Told them that there was a very large forest, That forest was like stretching from where we are now Up to Nkude. And he told them that he had gone round it, That it was in that place he would have to work; Told them that all species of bad animals That prey on human life live in that forest, Told them that, all the same, it there he would have to farm. When Ozoemene's machete is forged, and he clears the huge tract of territory on which he would farm with only five or six strokes of his enormous machete, one of the 'bad animals' disturbed in his forest home is 'Upigwi-ejiwóyé', 'Debt-owed-to-the-stomach', whose unsurfacing belly 'stretches from here [Aguleri] up to Lagos'. But no less unsurfacing is the Amkaroke portrayed in Oista Ajina's version of the epic as recorded by Ezinma, especially after it is settled that the feeding of the hero would be a communal affair:

As soon as this was settled, Individuals began to donate barns of yams For the feeding of Emeka, son of Okoye. Altogether, no less than 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 'Agba', the soundless deep. They showed Emeka and told him To go there always 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 this and started to drink – Fausa dam! Fausa dam! As his breath and throat echoed, The drinking and swirling 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 pit And the water creatures now exposed Rolled and jumped about For lack of water in their bed: Hippopotamus, sea cows, crocodiles and fishes of all kinds Become exposed on the bed of the lake, now dry. Then the four escorts went back And told Ajaia people their experience And in particular that the two water creatures. They asked those who had machetes, 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 Ajaia went for fish-killing and gathering. Until everybody's basket was full. They then carried the fish back. On returning, those who had caught fish Had already been done and pounded. They then made several heaps of food for Emeka, Each food heap towered like a storied building. Emeka collected all the heaps, Divided the whole into two water creatures. And rolled one in the soup and swallowed it as a lump, Collected the other and rolled it in the soup And used his hand to force it down. Because the barrels of soup made were not enough For the second gulp. The food had now been finished. Emeka then thanked the people But told them that he was not yet belly-full. Like the etiological motifs mentioned above, the 'romantic hyperbole' in the Anambra epics paradoxically tends to relate the epics to the real life of the people. The cases of exaggeration we have seen in the above examples all relate to farming and fishing as well as to the plenteous of food and other facets of
As told by the Orang Asli, the Anak large fish is a symbol of strength and courage. It is believed to protect the community from evil forces and bring good fortune. The Anak fish is often associated with the spirit world and is said to embody the power of the river itself.

In the local folklore, the Anak fish is said to be the guardian of the river. It is believed to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the river and is thought to possess healing properties. The Anak fish is also considered a source of strength and courage, and it is said to provide protection from evil forces.

The Anak fish is a symbol of the Orang Asli's connection to the land and the river. It is believed to represent the balance between nature and human society. The Anak fish is a reminder of the importance of respecting the natural world and the need to live in harmony with the environment.

In conclusion, the Anak fish is a significant cultural symbol for the Orang Asli. It serves as a reminder of the community's connection to the land and the river and is a powerful symbol of strength and courage. The Anak fish represents the Orang Asli's respect for the natural world and their commitment to living in harmony with the environment.
strict definition of the oral epic such as those recently adumbrated for the African epic by Johnson.50

Primary characteristics
1 Poetic
2 Narrative
3 Heroic
4 Legendary

Secondary characteristics
5 Length
6 Multi-functionality
7 Cultural and traditional transmission
8 Multi-generic qualities

The essence of the primary characteristics is summed up in the prelude to his performance of Ameka Okoye66 by Jeevani Okafor in his definition of the genre as ‘akjikọ maka ndi dogwu savomboge gbọ’, ‘stories concerning the heroes of old’. It seems to me that so long as a text or performance meets this essential definition it can be regarded as an epic. The criteria of length and verse must be considered optional and dependent on a whole range of socio-cultural variables, including the amount of leisure available to the members of the society in which the text or performance exists, and the aesthetic principles governing the performance and its functions.

The argument over the existence of the epic in Africa has ceased to be a problem in African literary scholarship. In fact, the problem never really existed, except in the minds of scholars like Ruth Fumegah,67 for whom all cultural phenomena everywhere in the world must find their archetypes in European traditions or be legislated out of existence. It is a pity that we have to use the term ‘epic’ to describe anything at all. For the ancient Greeks of Homer’s time, the word ‘epos’ from which ‘epic’ derives simply meant ‘oral utterance’ or simply, ‘speaking’.68 It was not until the time of Aristotle, four centuries later, that it came to acquire some aspects of the meaning which it still retains among Eurocentric pundits, ‘metrical representation of heroic action’.69 But this definition from Aristotle’s Poetics applied equally to tragedy and referred to forms of writing rather than oral performance, since the Homeric poems had been transmitted to Aristotle’s time through writing and its oral origins were apparently unknown. Today, new and idiosyncratic definitions have tended to obscure rather than illuminate for us what the epic means. But whatever else the word may mean to European scholars, for us in Africa, it is a convenient term, when writing in English, to denote tales of great moment concerning heroes of old and for which there are definite local terms or descriptions in African languages, such as the above description of the Anamba Igbo epic in Jeevani

APPENDIX

Mbido Olu Ozoeme:  
The Beginning of Ozoeme’s Career  
(The English translation is quoted in the text above)

Ozoeme newe gba aro naasaa a mulu j a.  O newe kene nne a na mma a.  O na ya.
O si ya:
‘Na uma ja-awali a ogu na mma;
Na ogu na mma avu umu ja-awali a,
Ka n ya we awuha an jiru olu;
Maka na angu na-enye ndi be ve nso gbua.’
Nma nya bpy Ndibe newe kwe nwa a,
Si a na nke i kapali nwa di mma,
Ma nga a Lunjat m,
Na onu a adu ije ija eli
Na j aja muli mma nwa,
Na o zugo.
O si a na o bera ekwokwu
E we we ve ja-aluwa a mma nji.
Nuete mma any;
Ozoeme nna avu ja-an ka
Siie nnymu we tie ka n’uma anyi nji
O newe si ya:
‘O nwa oke mma ejy avu ka mma n’aya?’
Spectators: [Laughter]

Narrator: [Says]
O: Ja si ja ake kaalaj a mma,
Enwele jeev Oka,
Oge mbu avu,
Oka na-agbụm nwa bu etu,
Oka new ike anyi ji efe ike.
Oge Oyiolu na-ahajọ,
Oka ka anyi ji avu maka mma;
Oka ka anyi ji avu maka ogo;
Oka ka anyi ji avu maka ihe ike ihe anyi;
Eji egbo anyi;
Oge avu na Oyiolu ahajọ;
Ewe jee m Oka,
Wee jee npụgụ Aguọ Oka,
Si va na Ozoeme;
Si ka umu ikwu ya eti;
Si a mma si na Oka nme ya-um nwa bu mma
Auwụka nwa mma.
Ewe Oka wee poọgụ nwa;
O za mma.

O si a, Nya bu mma gi bu Ozoeme,
O ra akka?
O si a na i mpu a na nji,
‘Na i ja-awu ya a’ na anyi;
Si a ngi mee ihe umu ji waa bu jluh Oka
Na mma eje Oja ja-awu nwa.
Oka si a nwa,
Si a na mma ajia-awu;
Na ajia-awu nya ihe n’bụt;
Enwele jide n’uwa mma Ozoeme nji,
We jide n’ihe ihe n’bụt;
Ozoeme nma m n’ekwu nwa;
Dj ka si nnymu ba Ozoeme,
Spectators: [Laughter]
Narrator: [Says]
O: Nwala Ozoeme,
Si va na mma nnye;
‘Nwa Ozoeme;
Awụgba gi mma nji;
Enwele bute nwa bu mma,
E newe nwa mma nji nnye;
Ma sọdọ nwa bu mma;
Si ka si nnymu we je Oziaka,
Nueta nna inwu-di a nma buwi a;
Ozoeme nma nye;
O je ari a ko, a ko;
Siya a;
Silọ nwa na n’abe;
‘O si a na uma newe;
O weew si ni be;
Si a na nya pụtụ ihe di ka ise uha gari aga;
Isi a nya newi oga nnye muaka ihe;
Orịa anyi adwọ ka si ebe a anyi no nnye;
Ewe je Nkpa;
Si va va na nya agharanwe a;
Na o gbe a ka n’anya ja-awu;
Si a ma aji anyi nnye;
Dibada na nwa bu orịa;
Si a na n’anya awarara a;
O buyu na ihe di aji anyi nnye;
Na-egbu mumadi dibada na nwa bu orịa;
Si ma n’eiwu ka n’anya ja-awu.’
Chukwuem Anonye

FOOTNOTES

1 Omahle is the indigenous name for what is today commonly called Anambra's first referendum and the misrepresentation of the original name by the British Colonial Administration.


3 Enitimi describes the hero as "Anambra Nkoro" or "Ekwo Ekoyo" for Be. In our own field investigations at Aguleri and Amuzu in 1983 and 1985, we found that the form of "Anambra Nkoro" is not as popular. This form, which is used in this and other articles on the epic, is however most likely to be an abbreviation of "Anambra Nkoro," first by the elision of "Ace;" next, by "Anambra," and finally by progressive vowel assimilation, to Ekwo. See Enitimi, 1972, for a detailed description of the phonological processes involved. The resultant abbreviation is of a kind that is quite common in the Anambra area and in the neighbourhood, as can be seen in the names, "Ansehe", abbreviated from "Ansehebe;" "Mhugo," abbreviated from "Mhugonti;" and "Nkoro," abbreviated from "Nkoroace;" 4 The term 'it' is probably cognate with the Yoruba 'itsi,' but it involves a far greater degree of what Okewopo describes as "facial play" than in the Yoruba conception of the genius as historical narrative as opposed to fictional narrative; see Ifode Okewopo, Myth in Africa (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

5 Literally, 'if done to me, I revenge.'

6 'Mshago' is an abbreviation of 'Mshangito,' as explained in the next note.

7 Enitimi, "The Ekwo Ekoyo Epic," 5, gives different translations of the names of most of these monsters, viz., 'The one who lives in the sky and sheds rain,' for instance, 'no. 2,' for 'The one who lives in the sky and sheds the sky' (No. 9), 'The immortal one' (No. 13), 'The nature of the top of the elephant' (No. 20). I have followed Enitimi in the other translations as well as in the translation of 'Ita' as 'natures,' although the latter seems dubious and still be verified in the field.

8 'Amor', together with 'Emeneha' and the amokly God ('Chukwu') are the three trinity of supernatural powers beheld Anemoe. It is not clear whether the theology and metaphysics implicit in the composition of the trilogy are the same. It is likely that the epic is a fragment from the Nri or related mythology of which Anambra traditions form a part. Or could this be a case of "loan-Christianization" as is matter for research here?

9 "Nnabudali" ('Ekere's Bad') is a type of stock character found in many other Nigerian epics. The Mambya epic to which the hero is normally accompanied by a personal 'guru.' The hero's bad mediums between him and the higher supernatural powers beheld Anemoe. It is not clear whether the theology and metaphysics implicit in the composition of the trilogy are the same. It is likely that the epic is a fragment from the Nri or related mythology of which Anambra traditions form a part. Or could this be a case of "loan-Christianization" as is matter for research here?

10 Enitimi, "The Ekwo Ekyo Epic," 5-6.

11 In Uteite heroic narratives, "Agbohigu and his sorceries side by side, Mode, while they gate their life till today" (John Enitimi, "The Hero in Uteite Heroic Narrative," BA thesis (Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1979), 21). In Uteite heroic narratives, the hero leaps up into the Omega river and is seen no more; but in some other versions of the legend, Igwaza simply walks off into the unknown; since he is beyond physical death. (Felix A. Azum-Boloye, "The Hero in Uteite Heroic Narrative," BA thesis (Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1979). 31).


13 Okewopo, The Ekwo Ekyo Epic, 3.

14 See John Edward, "The Ekwo Ekyo Epic," Tenor Paper in Literature and Folklore in Africa (Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1980), for a detailed description of the Kigboto Kingdom, to which the hero returns. Also, see Okewopo, The Ekwo Ekyo Epic, 3.


18 See John Edward, "The Ekwo Ekyo Epic," Tenor Paper in Literature and Folklore in Africa (Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1980), for a detailed description of the Kigboto Kingdom, to which the hero returns. Also, see Okewopo, The Ekwo Ekyo Epic, 3.

19 Okewopo, The Ekwo Ekyo Epic, 3.


22 John Edward, "The Ekwo Ekyo Epic," Tenor Paper in Literature and Folklore in Africa (Department of English, University of Ibadan, 1980), for a detailed description of the Kigboto Kingdom, to which the hero returns. Also, see Okewopo, The Ekwo Ekyo Epic, 3.


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