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The Igbo Folk Epic

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Chukwuma Azuonye discusses the Igbo folk epic and suggests fallacies in the Eurocentric approaches of some epic scholars.

**Fallacies in Epic Scholarship**

Four fallacies recur in the existing scholarship on heroic narrative poetry, otherwise known as the epic. The first is that the epic, indeed all heroic poetry, flourishes only in centralized, monarchical societies and that it is essentially an aristocratic genre of traditional poetry featuring mainly royalty and their aristocratic courtiers and is sustained by the patronage of royal courts. The second is that the epic is invariably a monumental narrative of great length, composed in elevated style by means of formulas or recurrent metrical units that serve more as aide-mémoire, filling lines and half-lines in the essentially mechanical process of oral-formulaic composition in performance rather than as semantic units creating culture-specific images of things or fully individuated human personalities. From this fetishization of verse, or metrical composition, and of length, or the elevated style in the conception of the epic, emerge the third and fourth fallacies, namely, that the epic is invariably a verse or metrical composition and that heroic narrative poems of brief compass, the so-called epic songs or heroic lays manifested in, for example, the Eddic lays of northern Europe and the briefer heroic songs of pre-Homeric Mycenaean antiquity and elsewhere, are not epics per se but epics in formation, ancestors of the epic, or epic fragments. Until very recently, the epic has been ruled out of existence in the storytelling traditions of many peoples of the world, especially in Africa, because of these fallacies. Chief among those whose heritage of epic poetry has been either misunderstood or denied are nonaristocratic and traditionally republican people, such as the 25 million Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. This article discusses the types of heroic narrative poetry that have been found to exist in Igbo culture and that, on the basis of the most universal and inalienable features of the genre, cannot but be recognized as folk epics. The admission of these forms as epics will no doubt have important implications for the comparative understanding of the nature of the genre and its future definition.

**Major Categories of Heroic Narrative Performance**

Two major categories of heroic narrative performances have been found to flourish among the Igbo. The first is a product of warfaring culture and forms part of a complex of traditional war music, *iri-aha*, found especially among the Cross River Igbo of the extreme southeastern corner of Igbo country on the frontiers with the neighboring Efik-Ibibio and Eko peoples of Akwa-Ibom and Cross River states of Nigeria. The second is a product of peace and a culture of prosperity belonging to the tradition of *ita* (romantic stories), often described by both the tellers and the hearers as *ntu* (lies), which form part of work and leisure, especially among the fishing and farming communities of the Anambra Igbo of the extreme northwestern corner of Igbo country in the Omambala River basin close to the lower Niger. The former comprises heroic narrative “songs” of brief compass, whereas the later comprises heroic narrative “recitations” of great length, some of which take several days (and, sometimes claimed, weeks) to perform. Whereas the respective Cross River and Anambra traditions epitomize these categories,
variants of the two categories are found elsewhere in Igbo culture. For example, briefer forms of romantic heroic tales that share roughly the same kind of ambience and themes as the monumental recitations of the Anambra Igbo have been recorded among the Western Igbo of Delta State, west of the lower Niger (Okpewho, 1990, 1992), where they are sung rather than recited.

Typical examples of the briefer forms of heroic narrative “songs” (the Cross River Igbo type) are the narrative varieties of the war songs (abu-aha) of the Ohafia Igbo, a formerly warlike but now mainly agricultural and trading community of 25 village-groups located on the Cross River in the southern terminus of the great ridge and escarpment that traverses Igbo country from Enugu to Arochukwu. No specific local terminology exists for these narrative songs, but several descriptive phrases are constantly used when referring either to their form (most commonly ububuo, narrative) or their content (e.g., akuko-aka, stories of the past; akuko-ali, stories of the land; akuko-ndi-ikike-Ohafia, stories of Ohafia heroes; or akuko-mgbe-ichin, stories of the time of the ancestors). Besides the narrative songs, abu-aha includes a repertoire of traditional battle songs, commonly called ikperikpe ogu (battle rhythms), and invocative war songs, often described as itu-afa (praise naming). The battle songs form part of the paraphernalia of traditional warfare and, in their original forms, presumably were chanted by warriors on their way to battle, in battle, or on their victorious returns from battle. Today, they are performed as lyrical accompaniments of a well-known type of war dance (frequently staged on important social and cultural occasions) that comprises dramatic reenactments of typical battle scenes and movements. One of the victory songs in this repertoire, like many other battle songs, metaphorically describes the defeated enemy whose members have been captured alive as a leopard trapped in a hunt:

The leopard has been trapped!  
Come, let us go home, come let us go!  
The leopard has been trapped!  
Come, let us go home, come let us go!  
Don’t you know, the leopard has been trapped!  
Come, let us go home, come let us go! ...

The invocative songs comprise strings of names and praise names, with compact allusions to the legends of the great heroes as well as to myths, both creation and customary ones. They bear the unmistakable imprint of the traditional ritual ceremonies that, according to the literature, were usually performed before warriors went to battle to fortify their morale or immediately on their return to cleanse them from their deeds of blood. The following are the opening lines of an example of the former type, performed today as part of the reenactment of war in the Ohafia war dance:

He that would shudder before a corpse, let him retreat!  
He that would shudder before a corpse, I say, let him retreat!  
Ajadu Uma Ajadu, pray drink wine for me.  
Mkpawe Imaga Odo, pray drink wine for me.  
Adukuru Mmon, son of Udumoke,  
Wherever you may be, we are at wine.  
Kamalu, son of Ngwo, man of Agala-Nde-Odo-Ukiiwe,  
Come, drink wine for me and soothe my voice,  
For the night that falls on afo must dawn on nkwo.  
My great father Awa Afaka, he-that-goes-to-battle-with-a-farming-knife,  
Man of Udegbe-Ezhi-Anunu,  
Pray, we are at wine.  
Come, dip your lip in my wine,  
For lip dipped in wine is wine itself.  
(Azuonye, 1990a)

By contrast to the battle songs and the invocations, the narrative war songs represent the drama of the emergence of the apical ancestral warriors as the great heroes of the land. Most of the heroes are war heroes, and their action is located in head-hunting and slave-raiding forays into the territories of their Ibibio andEkoi neighbors or into the Igbo heartland. Historians have mistaken as mercenarism the people’s apparent love of warfare, especially with regard to their alliance (ukwuzi) with their immediate Igbo neighbors to the south, the Aro, who masterminded the supply of slaves to European dealers on the coast. However, from the traditions of the Ohafia people themselves, their heroes, called ufiem, epitomize their people’s historical need for security within the borders of lands cut off from the rest of Igbo country and open to hostile Ibibio and Eko neighbors. Over the generations, the ability to overpower an enemy in battle or single combat came to be seen not only as desirable but as a sine qua non for social recognition. Those who failed to show a head that
they won in battle in their youthful days were denied social privileges, and such humiliating sanctions also drastically affected their spouses. Not surprisingly, most of the heroes of the texts belong to the order of young men spurred by this heroic ethos to engage in warfare or head-hunting to earn the *ufiem* title. Otherwise, they are heroes who have already earned the title but are spurred on by the special conceptions of manhood and honor that are the hallmark of heroes across the world to come out in defense of the honor of their people. *Amoogu*, one of the most popular of the epics, recounts fortitude of an unlikely hero: an unknown young man from the smallest of the 25 village-groups who alone is able to accomplish the test of endurance, namely, charging 12 guns while seated naked in a nest of soldier ants, a feat that one must accomplish before the Ohafia people can overcome a rival community, Alike, led by a magical hero, the short-armed dwarf named Omiko. In *Egbete*, the young hero is persuaded by his concerned uncle to break with his thrice-bereaved mother, who dresses him like a little girl to protect him from the dangers of war. Fortunately, he returns triumphant with a live captive. His mother's song of joy at his reception is said to be the origin of the art of singing war songs. Interestingly, women are highly visible in these tales-in-song not as fair maidens to be won or defended by the men but as warriors in their own right and prime movers of action. In *Nne Mgbaago*, a young woman in love takes the risk of dressing up like a warrior and venturing into the enemy Ibibio territory in search of her husband, who has been lost in battle. In most versions of the epic, she rescues him before he is sold into slavery. In a few versions, she recovers her husband's dead body and gives it a befitting burial. In *Inyan Olugu*, a humiliated wife of an *uojo* is forced by her deprivations to lure her husband into enemy territory, where she herself overpowers and kills four men in an ambush and delivers their chopped-off heads to her husband to take home in triumph as his own. She earns the title *ogbu-etuwi-di-ya* (she-that-kills-and-gives-the-honor-to-her-husband). Included in the repertoire are more pristine hunter-heroes, such as the hero of *Elibe Aja* who kills a man-eating leopard that harries Aro country but in a later encounter is himself killed when his gun explodes in a cavern. Other heroes include sporting heroes, great dancers, and modern political heroes and statesmen in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict of the 1960s. Other texts are myths and fables that focus on moral issues in a world that appears to be much the same as the world of the heroes.

**Aesthetic Principles**

The poetry is mainly in the form of chant, with moments of intense lyrical, oratorical, and ritual expression in the modes of song, recitation, and what appears to be ordinary speech. It is usually delivered in high speech, with the singer moving rapidly from one hero to another. Brevity and clarity are valued for their own sakes and out of deference to the republican ethos, which calls for the celebration not of one extraordinarily large cult figure but of heroes representing as many peoples and communities in Ohafia as possible. This and other underlying aesthetic principles are constantly invoked by both the artists and their audiences in oral literary criticism that is voiced in the course of performances or that can be elicited through in-depth interviews.

Other traditional aesthetic principles that are voiced in oral literary criticism are functionality, authenticity, and variety. Studying these principles is of great value because it enables us to better appreciate several features of the genre that can easily be misinterpreted in the light of exocultural literary theories and analytical models. Apart from the light they cast on the compact brevity and multivariety of heroic tales in the repertoires of the bards in this oral tradition, these principles help us to better appreciate the nature and function of the repeated phrases or formulas that constitute the main linguistic-stylistic resources used by the bards in the complex process of composition that takes place during oral performance. For Milman Parry and Albert Lord (the architects of the modern oral-formulaic theory, which revolutionized the study of the epic from the 1930s) and their followers, formulas—as manifested in repeated phrases in the Homeric epics that are similar to those found in the Yugo-slavic oral epics and recorded in the field and studied by them—are viewed as metrical units with no particularized meaning, whether with reference to persons, places, or things. Rather, they are seen as generic in that they evoke generalized images of heroic reality that can be applied to any actor in the heroic world. Their more important function is to fill metrical slots (lines and half-lines) in the narrative gestalt. By contrast, in the Igbo epics the function of formulas seems to go beyond mere metrical necessity. These repeated phrases are mostly in the form of epithets (mostly
praise names) that identify heroes in terms of their distinctive physical or psychological attributes; associations with ancestors, other heroes, communities, or other groups in the heroic world; and the circumstances of their emergence as heroes. Thus, for example, we have the following recurrent types: Obirhazu-ka-ozo-agba, “Hunchback-that-runs-faster-than-his-peers” (descriptive epithet); Nwa-Nine-m-Orieji, “Son-of-my-great-mother-Orieji” (associative epithet); and Omere-nde-ekpu-ole, “Terror-of-silver-merchants” (mythopoeic or historical epithet). The allusions in these epithets are not only often particularized but also required by tradition to be in accord with popular myths and legends about the heroes invoked. Other repeated phrases in the texts are verbal formatives (focus formulas) that serve to focus attention on particular types of themes. For example, the passage of time is almost always indicated by the phrase ya rua hi (“it went past a year”); movement from place to place by wo ga-aga ogo mmuo (“they went past their village”); cautious, stealthy movement by wo jewe mbelege mbelege (“they went mbelege mbelege”); and departure by ya zhia ali zon oto turu (“he/she rose from the ground and set off”). Thus, it appears that we can find parallels to generic formulas of the types described by Parry and Lord in the focus of the formulas.

At first sight, the monumental forms of heroic narrative “recitations” (the Anambra Igbo type) might appear to be plain prose narrative—one of the reasons that texts of this kind have been denied recognition as epics in Eurocentric scholarly circles. However, the verbal texture of the narratives is basically recitative and eloquently poetic in terms of inner structure. The recitative fabric is varied by chanted and spoken passages in the song that add lyrical, oratorical, and liturgical tones to the narration. Here, for example, are the opening lines of the epic of Ameke Okoye recorded in Aguleri in 1983:

(Three beats of ubom)
Narrator: Ehee-e!
I, Jeveizu Okaavo,
Of Okpu Ivite Aguleri,
I am the one that tells the tale of Ameke Okoye;
5 I am the one that recounts his story
Inside Nigeria;
I am that very person
That tells the stories of the heroes
Of old.
10 That is what I am about to get into
And expound.
(Three beats of ubom)
(Song) Uooo, people of Oba-na-Iduu ooo!
Uooo, people of Oba-na-Iduu ooo!
Uooo, people of Oba-na-Iduu ooo!
15 Let him that is inside not come out again,
For that person that weaves trouble is out!
Let him that is outside go in quickly,
For that person that weaves trouble is out!
Iduu oooo!
(I beat of ubom)
20 (Chant) Hmmmm! Hmmmm! Hmmmm! Hmmmm!
Ooooo! Ooooo! Ooooo! Ooooo!
That day spirits went for the ranking of heroes!
That day Chukwu called for the ranking of heroes, eo!
That day Chukwu called for the ranking of heroes in the square of public gathering!
That day Chukwu called for the ranking of heroes in the square of public gathering
My child, do not go for the ranking of heroes, for there can be no ranking,
In the square of public gathering!
Didn't Okaavo, the spirit, tell him not to go, and he said he would go for the ranking of heroes in the square of public gathering

Didn't Ojaali, the spirit, tell him not to go, and he said he would go for the ranking of heroes in the square of public gathering!

(Pause)

(Chant)
We've come, whatever will happen, let it happen;
That was the undoing of Nduba of Ikelionwu, Ikelionwu,
What will happen will happen as it happened to Nduba of Ikelionwu,

Was it not Nduba of Ikelionwu that begot Ikelionwu Mbaamali,
Hence Ikelionwu did not know what to do with Mbaamali?
Ikelionwu enacted a law in their land,
Saying that lest the novice should know mpama in Ikelionwu,
If the novice knows the mask, if the novice knows the mask,

Much later he will join the masquerade society.
If the novice knows Mbaamali of Ikelionwu,
It means that he has become powerless.
O hero, Mbaamali of Ikelionwu, welcome!
Hmmm, iyoooo, ooooo ooooo-m!

Iduu, I salute you!
Spectators: Welcome!
Narrator: Hmmm.
We've now gone into it.

(Chant)
That day the hero was preparing for war in heaven;
That day the hero was preparing for war in the house of the sky-dweller, Enu-nyili-mba!
That day the hero was preparing for the house of the sky-dweller, Enu-nyili-mba!
My child, you joker, by which route will you (get to the point from which you will) ascend the stairs?
But the hero said that, come morning, he would mount the stairs.

Didn't Ojaali, the spirit, tell him not to go, for there was no road out there, but he said he could go!
Didn't Okaavo, the spirit, tell him not to go, for there was no road out there, but he said he could go and return!
My child, do not go to the house of the sky-dweller, for it has no road, but he said he would go and return!
The hero said that, come morning, he would ascend the stairs, go and return.
Hmmm! Iyoo ooo, ho-oo-ooo!

Let us go to the house of Enu-nyili-mba—
The man that lives in heaven.
This is how it went.
Obuora Udechukwu,
It's beginning is this:
This world began
And people lay about in the world,
That is, all things created by God.
They stayed like that,
Stayed on and on and on.

No one knew what planted *aku-ubili, aku-ubili* planted itself.
People came out one day—
Sheets of paper from heaven
Came scattering upon the earth,

Paper on which something was written.
From above, it scattered on these people’s town;
From above, it scattered on these people’s town—
All over the world.

Those who knew how to read, whosoever picked up a sheet,
Gazing at it a while,
He would start to weep,
Saying: What is this
What is it that we (the inhabitants) of the world have done

That this man, Enu-nyili-mba, who lives in heaven
Should write us this kind of letter,
If you took the letter to your kinsman who knew how to read,
Gazing at it a while,
He would start to weep.

What he wrote in the letter
Was that he said
That is he, Enu-nyili-mba,
That he had fixed a feast for himself
Saying that this feast he had fixed for himself,

Where he lived in heaven,
That it was for seven weeks he would hold it,
And this feast he would hold for seven weeks,
That all things truly human abounding on this earth born of people’s breath,
That a commandment he was handing down to everyone that lived in this world
who was a human being conceived and born, was this:

Nobody should drink water;
And nobody should eat food;
And nobody should chew tooth-stick;
And nobody should eat palm nuts.
Until he completed the seven-week feast.

But if anyone turned a deaf ear and drank water there on earth,
That he would see that person from heaven
And he would kill him off.

(Azuonye and Udechukwu, 1984)

**An Origin Among Fishermen**
The monumental character of the Anambra epics seems to be a concomitant of the kind of social and cultural environment out of which it is believed to have emerged. Local informants agree that fishing, for which the Anambra region is famous, provided the original setting for the epics. During the rainy season (April through September), the Anambra River would from time to time overflow its banks, a phenomenon that the people call *iji*. After each *iji*, a large haul of fish called *azuogba* would be stranded on the shores when the waters suddenly receded. In the past, before the introduction of refrigeration, fish harvests each day had to be smoked before dawn to preserve the fish. To keep the fishermen awake while the smok-
ing was going on, gifted storytellers would tell fantastic stories (ita) or lies (ntu) that invariably figured superhuman persons of extraordinary strength and size who fought and overcame monsters to maintain the peace and prosperity of the land. Deliberately sensational and replete with hyperbolic images, these stories were generally episodic and suspenseful. Over time, these stories are said to have fused into single, monumental tales, each of which took several days to tell.

**Ameke Okoye**

*Ameke Okoye*, from one of whose versions the above excerpt is taken, is among the most popular of these epics. The gigantic hero performs 20 great tasks and in the end overcomes the cruel sky-dwelling sadist who brings so much grief to humankind on earth. Another popular epic, *Ojaadili*, presents a refiguration of the great wrestler Ojaadili, who emerges as champion in the lands of humans, animals, and spirits; however, by contrast to the folktale in which he perishes when he is moved by hubris to challenge his own personal god (*chi*), Ojaadili the epic hero returns triumphant from his victories in spiritland to avenge the persecution of his father by a cruel king who sadistically plucks one of his teeth every year at his annual royal festival. Restoring sanity to the land, he enslaves the cruel king and his family and sets up large-scale farms to feed the deprived people. In another popular epic, *Ozoemena Ndive*, the hero, a child prodigy, disturbs a forest that is inhabited by monsters of all direction. This fascinating epic recounts the hero's seven-year flight from the most uncompromising of these monsters, Nduye-Nduye, a flight that takes him across the face of the earth and exposes him to various arts and sciences that he brings home to his people.

**Romantic Epic**

By contrast to the Cross River epics, which like the Mandinka epic of Sunjata are essentially historical, the Anambra epics are romantic ones, comparable to (among others) the *Ozidi* saga of the Izon (Ijo) of the Niger River delta, *Kambili* of Mali, *Mwindo* of Baganya in Zaire, *Lianja* of the Congo, and *Moneblum* (The Blue Man). Whereas the fantastic is severely limited in the historical epics, magic and fantasy seem to be the essence of the romantic epics, and whereas the historical epics are herocentric, focusing their narration on the moments of heroic emergence or on single actions that define the status of their protagonists as heroes, the romantic epics are informed by the heroic monomyth and seem to embody the totality of the “traits” and “incidents” of the archetypal hero pattern, from prebirth and birth to death and after-death. Thus, the stories conventionally begin with the hero’s grandparents and progress through prophecies of the hero’s birth, unusual fatherhood, miraculous conception, unusual career in the womb, his birth and the signs of wonder accompanying it, his prodigious childhood, journeys, labors and miracles, transfiguration, passion, and disappearance from the face of the earth, be it into heaven or the land of spirits or into nothing, but not without leaving a mark of his heroic presence on earth.

**Heroic, Narrative, and Poetic**

Three features are shared in common by the two major categories of traditional performances in Igbo culture examined in this article. They are heroic, narrative, and poetic. These three features are the essence of the epic, the inalienable features that are shared with the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and with other worldwide manifestations of the genre, such as the *Aeneid*, the Indian *Mahabharata*, the Eddic lays of northern Europe, the French *Song of Roland*, the Mandinkan *Sunjata*, the *Mwindo* of the Baganya (Zaire), the Malian *Kambili*, the *Ozidi* saga of the Izon (Ijo) of the Niger River delta, and even the artificial Finnish epic *Kalevala*, created by Lonnrot. The social context, be it aristocratic or nonaristocratic, does not seem material to the concept of the hero, who is essentially a person of extraordinary physical, moral, spiritual, or intellectual capabilities who emerges in times of crisis to bring salvation to his people. Alternatively, he might be an embodiment of a modus vivendi on which the people’s survival and progress in difficult circumstances depends. Thus, as much as heroes exist in aristocratic societies, heroes abound in peasant cultures as well. In addition, it appears that verse, be it metrical or nonmetrical, is by no means an inalienable property of the epic. Poetry rather than verse seems the inalienable medium, and poetry can exist in verse, prose, or an admixture of the two. Indeed, four modes or styles of vocalization—recitation, speech, song, and chant—have been found to be employed in such compositions in Africa and elsewhere, and Igbo folk epics of the two categories examined here use these two poetic modes, the Anambra type being mainly in recitation and speech modes with song and chant interludes and the Cross River type being mainly in song and chant modes with recitation and speech.
interludes. Length and historical content seem to be variable rather than fixed and to be inalienable properties of the folk epic.

Further Reading