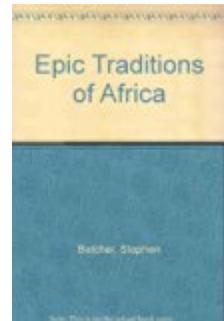


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Belcher. *Epic Traditions of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. xxii + 276 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21281-8; \$39.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-253-33501-2.

Reviewed by Lisa McNee (Queen's University)  
Published on H-AfrLitCine (August, 2000)



Without a doubt, this new book will be hailed as a landmark in studies of the African epic. Belcher's study of the major African epic traditions now available in print form does double duty as an excellent introduction to the epic genre in Africa and as an elegant response to specialist debates. In *Epic Traditions of Africa* he offers cogent and convincing answers to pressing questions in the field in an accessible and clear prose style that all readers will appreciate.

Belcher's work provides readers with an array of tools necessary for interpreting African epic traditions. Assuming that the typical reader will have some knowledge of literary interpretation, Belcher concentrates on the ethnographic and historical background that readers need in order to comprehend African epics. The breadth of his knowledge of the relevant ethnographic and historical documentation is nothing short of astonishing: not only does Belcher refer to studies so current that they were still in preparation when his book was in press, but he also shares his knowledge of early European travelers' accounts and the Arabic manuscripts that give key accounts of medieval West African states.

In contrast to Isidore Okpewho and others who have generalized about the epic genre in Africa in the past, Belcher insists that African examples stand apart and should be judged on their own merits. In doing so, he makes it possible to define the African epic on its own terms, perhaps for the first time. This does not preclude comparison, as he notes; however, as he states, African heroic tradition should not be made subservient to Eurasian traditions in attempts to develop and sustain frameworks for interpreting the genre. Okpewho's *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979), long the standard in the

field, finally has a real competitor.

Performance is of less interest to Belcher than the actual texts and their variants. This is understandable, as some of the knowledge carried in the epic tradition will inevitably be lost if it is not recorded in print form. For instance, Belcher notes that the Duala tradition of Jeki la Njambe is becoming more and more esoteric as the performance tradition fades. Studies such as those of Ralph Austen (*The Elusive Epic: Performance, Text and History in the Oral Narrative of Jeki la Njambe* (Cameroon Coast), African Studies Association Press, 1995) or David Conrad (*A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu According to Tayiru Banbera*, Fontes Historiae Africae, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) offer perhaps the only hope of saving this elusive knowledge, for epic changes over time, transforming itself in order to reflect wider social changes. Belcher does describe differing performance styles briefly, distinguishing the highly dramatic styles of Central African performers from the largely narrative and more restrained performances of West African griots; however, this book is focused on texts and contexts, rather than on performance and style.

In each chapter, Belcher offers ethnographic and historical information, as well as capsule versions of the significant narrative elements of each epic considered, before treating relevant questions in depth. In the chapter on Central African epic, he surveys a variety of texts from Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo, and Gabon, observing that most of them appear to share more in common with myth than with historical narrative. This is also true of the Sahelian hunters' and fishers' songs examined in chapter three.

Historical narrative dominates the other epic traditions considered. The chapters on these traditions

(Soninke, Mande-Sunjata, Bamana-Segou, Fula), ordered according to linguistic and ethnic identity, form the core of the book. This core is as solid as bedrock. Belcher writes with great authority about Sunjata, and does not stint in his efforts to add to our knowledge. His tables comparing the different versions episode by episode will be of great use to serious students of the epic. In the chapter on the epic of Segou, Belcher paints the picture of the complex relationships between carousing members of the ton, rulers, and noble and/or servile political schemers just right, acknowledging the wealth of ethnographic writings in French on the Bamana by Dieterlen, Zahan, and their followers, but providing a useful corrective perspective. He also provides another useful table comparing different versions of the epic. Belcher's discussion of the Fula focuses on the significant epic traditions of Massina and the Futa Tooro. He offers a compelling shift in perspective by showing how Fula and Mande traditions have influenced and interpenetrated each other.

Belcher's acknowledgment of the many ties that bind the peoples of the Sahel together allows him to provide a persuasive resolution of the debate engendered by Mamadou Diouf's article ("L'invention de la littérature orale: Les épopées de l'espace soudano-sahélien," *Études littéraires* 24/2 (1991) 29-39) arguing that biased scholars have engineered the epic tradition. In a chapter on "emergent" traditions, Belcher deftly shows that Diouf's sharp perceptions may be fairly accurate, but that the ubiquitous cultural borrowing across the region explains the characteristics of Wolof epic that Diouf describes.

Of the book's nine chapters, seven are devoted to the Sahel. Given Belcher's interest in textual variation, this is not terribly surprising, since we have more print ver-

sions of these epics than of any others; however, the reader who seeks a complete inventory of African epic traditions will be disappointed. Belcher does not discuss southern Africa at all, and dismisses most Swahili *utenzi* as "translations or adaptations from Arabic epic" (57). Other readers may wonder whether Tuareg, Hasaniya, or Berber epic traditions and/or heroic songs similar to the hunter songs discussed in chapter three exist. As is frequently the case, Africa means exclusively sub-Saharan Africa in this work. Since Belcher's book is based on the extant documentation, however, some of these question marks may be useful in that they will spur researchers to conduct fieldwork on epic and heroic songs in these areas.

This volume is the ideal companion to *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997), which Belcher co-edited with John William Johnson and Thomas Hale. That work presents excerpts from many of the major traditions discussed in *Epic Traditions of Africa* in a highly usable format appropriate for university courses in African Studies and Comparative Literature and/or Folklore Studies. The glossary appended to *Epic Traditions of Africa* is an excellent teaching resource, and the wonderful appendix listing all known published versions of epics from Central and West Africa will be useful to all researchers interested in African epic. In light of this book's wide appeal, it is sure to appear on the bookshelves of all those who are truly interested in African oral traditions.

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**Citation:** Lisa McNee. Review of Belcher, Stephen, *Epic Traditions of Africa*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

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