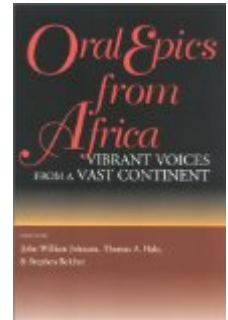


John William Johnson, Thomas A. Hale, Stephen Belcher, eds.. *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. xxii + 331 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33257-8.



Reviewed by Peter Midgley

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Oral Epics from Africa is a collection of textual extracts from a wide range of African epics. This is a relatively new, unexplored area of research and this volume constitutes the third in a series--the first of its kind to appear in print. The collection of twenty-five oral epics from West Africa proposes to be no more than an introduction to the African epic as a tradition. It is aimed at teachers of epic as a genre, but is useful for other related disciplines. The book contains an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary material, well organized into general works on the topic and works that deal with specific traditions.

The insightful introduction deals first with the problems encountered with the collection of oral materials, and also with the oxymoron *oral literature* and its various definitions. The editors argue that there seems to be an African *Epic Belt*, and that the epic tradition of West Africa needs to be distinguished from the panegyric traditions of Eastern and Southern Africa. They also express the hope that this will remain an ongoing debate and that the boundaries of the *epic belt* will be extended as more information is made available.

The discussion then turns to the regional similarities that occur in the literature and the role of women in the African Epic. Understandably, this is all dealt with briefly and superficially, but the bibliography does provide valuable extended reading on the subject.

Despite some intriguing discussions and insightful introductions, I was left slightly disappointed, largely due to the quality of the editing. While the editors argued in favour of keeping the text in the format it was presented in by the collector, and retaining the terminology used, this made for difficult reading. In some instances, there were insufficient footnotes; in others, the style of referencing was inconsistent. Thus, the *Epic of Askia Mohammed* has no footnotes, while the others all do. The lack of uniformity in spelling and terminology likewise impeded reading. To mention but one example, the oral narrator is referred to by any one of the following terms: jeli, djali, griot, jesere and others. Likewise, the reader is confronted with both Sunjata and Son-Jara as alternate spellings of one particular people. There is no justifiable reason why the editors could not

have stuck with either one of the spellings. While one is sympathetic to the ideal of retaining original terminology in an attempt to convey a more accurate meaning, it confuses the uninformed reader. All the variations make it difficult to create comparison and to keep up with intricate genealogies and histories. It would have been more helpful to use a global term, perhaps then explaining the original word or term in a footnote.

The selection of the extracts was, on the whole, unsatisfying. Throughout, the editors employed a carrot-stick technique: enough to get you interested, but never enough to give you a global picture of the whole. The narratives were cut to smithereens, leaving the reader to rely on cryptic transition passages. The worst case is undoubtedly the first: only thirty-eight lines out of the 780 lines in *Epic of Wagadu* are quoted. They take the following order: 75-78; 123-125; 14-15; 19-31; 47; 15, 16, 18, 19, 25-6, 28, 30; 690-696; 774-780. The order of the lines have been changed, completely destroying any sense of continuity the reader might be able to develop. The single lines appear without context, again preventing an overall picture of the text. Not once is the reader able to get a sense of the whole. If space was the overriding problem, it might have been better to introduce fewer texts more fully than to present many snippets from a wide range of texts. However, other texts do appear in more detail and are, as the introduction promises, rich in metaphor, allusion and history.

Despite a fairly lengthy introduction and a short introductory passage at the start of every epic, very little was said about the various styles of narrative encountered in the book--the elements of each (i.e. the differences and similarities). This could be attributed to the fact that this is still a relatively new field, but the extensive reading list at the end suggests that a more detailed introduction to each poem could have been made. The historical background to each poem was useful and generally well-informed. Even so,

the structure of these passages tended to be very formulaic, with little variation.

My overall impression is that this publication was put together hastily. It has the trappings of an excellent work, but the finishing touches are missing. The result is an uncut gem that will serve not only as a useful introduction to the field but also as an endless irritation to the scholar who wishes to use the material in class, and who must search elsewhere for more complete transcriptions.

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