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Review of Isidore Okpewho's Epic in Africa (New Edition).

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'The Mrabri [*sic*] speak the other languages of the area' [which languages? in which area? under what circumstances? how well?] (p. 102).

P. is prudent in his linguistic classification: pp. 11–35 are devoted to the Munda languages, pp. 37–9 to Nicobarese, pp. 41–56 to Aslian, and pp. 57–115 to the remaining Mon–Khmer groups of Burma, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, divided into Khasi, Monic, Khmeric, Pearic, Bahnaric, Katuic, Viet-Muong, Khmuic, and Palaungic.

P.'s *Guide* is based only on materials written in English, French and German. More recent source material in Russian, Vietnamese, Thai and Chinese is passed over in silence. This fact alone represents a serious shortcoming of the book. Significant advances have been made in the past decade in the field of South-East Asian linguistics, specifically in Mon–Khmer studies, but this is nowhere reflected here; apart from Huffman's linguistic bibliography (New Haven, 1986) the most recent publications date of 1984. Some omissions are puzzling: Luce's *Old Burma—Early Pagán* (Ascona, 1969–70) is mentioned, but not his *Phases of pre-Pagán Burma: languages and history* (London, 1985), even though the latter deals more directly with questions of linguistic prehistory than the former.

Factual errors are numerous, the information frequently outdated and some of the sources dubious. For instance, in the case of Vietic, P. refers to population figures of the 1960s, but Trần Tri Dõi conducted a census in 1985 on Arem, Rục, Maliêng, Mày, Sách, the results of which were published in Nguyễn Phú Phong, Trần Tri Dõi and Michel Ferlus, *Lexique Vietnamien-Rục-Français* (Paris, 1988). This is not mentioned here.

The population figure given for 'Lawa' (endonym /lavwəʔ/) should be twice as high; for Mon—at the time of writing not available to P. in a Western language—see now Gehan Wijeyewardene (ed.) *Ethnic groups across national boundaries in mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 1990, 14–47). P. claims that 'there is no official distinction between Thai and Mon except in the army and, traditionally, the Buddhist *sangha* [*sic*]'; yet Graham, writing in 1924, states that separate units in the armed forces had already been abolished.

'Tonga' and 'Mos' do not exist; they are, in fact, Kensiw, located in Trang, Satul and Phattalung provinces in southern Thailand, some of whom refer to themselves as /maniʔ/ 'person', as do a number of other Aslian groups, including Kensiw of Yala. 'Kintaq' are linguistically Kensiw, and should therefore not be listed as a separated group.

Some ethnonyms, modern and ancient, are not mentioned at all, such as 'Meng' (Mon), 'Tae-aen' (Kensiw), the Old Mon term *krom* for 'Khmer' (?), epigraphic Thai *khâm*, modern Thai /khõ:m/, Old Mon *lwa'* for 'Lawa', hence modern Thai /lúaʔ/, the last referred to, without etymology, by P. ('Luaq').

P.'s 'Mrabri' are Mlabri, and the most recent work referred to is Trier's (1981); P. makes no mention of Surin Pookajorn's ethno-archaeological survey for which Egerod, Rischel and Theraphan acted as linguistic consultants, and the results of which have been in the public domain for some time.

Language maintenance is another area where P.'s information should be used with caution; often, as in the case of Nyah Kur for example, a language has been reported 'dying' when in fact it has settled into a stable bilingual situation. The number of Kuy speakers in Thailand may be declining, but it is declining because more Kuy speak Khmer, not because of Thai.

The maps are of little value: the information is outdated (for Vietnam consult now *Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam* [Minority groups of Vietnam], Hanoi, 1984) and the scale is too small (between 1:2 m to 1:7 m; the location of languages is indicated only by a reference number); apart from major towns (some misspelt, map 3 for 'Trenng' read 'Trang') and the co-ordinates, the maps do not feature any other reference points, such as rivers and mountain ranges. Except for the ASEMI set, other cartographic material is not quoted, such as Salzner's and the recent Wurm-Hattori *et al.* Other ethnolinguistic surveys, including maps, such as for Northern Khmer or Kuy in Thailand have been ignored.

Lapses such as locating the Kuy in 'south-east Thailand' (p. 87, for the north-eastern provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubol) or shifting *Dvāravatī* to southern Thailand suggest the author's lack of firsthand acquaintance with the region and its history.

I cannot judge the section on Munda, but at least P.'s reference to Zide in the preface instils confidence; as for the South-East Asian part, he provides information which is often incorrect, incomplete and outdated. This *Guide* does not represent what we know today about Austroasiatic languages and their speakers.

CHRISTIAN BAUER

ISIDORE OKPEWHO: *The epic in Africa: towards a poetics of the oral performance*. [Revised paperback edition.] xvii, 288 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. \$20.

This is a paperback edition of Isidore Okpewho's pioneering survey of the oral epic in sub-Saharan African societies. In the ten years preceding the first appearance of the book in 1979, controversy over the existence of the epic in Africa dominated African oral literary scholarship. The battle lines had been drawn by Ruth Finnegan in her *Oral literature in Africa* (Oxford, 1970), in which she had asserted that the epic did not exist in Africa, using the Homeric epics as the absolute yardstick for defining the genre. Okpewho's book not only presents and analyses rich and varied textual and contextual evidence to the contrary, it also draws from the author's training in classical and comparative literature to establish points of congruence between the African epic and parallel performances across the world. By and large, the book gracefully over-reaches its original target of demonstrating the existence of the epic in Africa and

blossoms into a classic discourse on the primacy of performance in the poetics of all categories of oral art.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter i provides a broadly-based 'introduction to traditional African art', in which Okpewho deliberately forces a shift of focus from the narrow ethnographic concerns of the anthropologists and art historians who pioneered the scholarly study of African art to the much neglected aesthetic dimensions of the subject. This provides a suitable context for the close attention paid in the rest of the book not only to the artistic qualities of the epic *per se* but also to the ethno-aesthetic environment which conditions performance. 'The resources of the oral epic' which he discusses in ch. ii are firmly situated in this ethno-aesthetic environment. Okpewho's intellectual freedom enables him to offer a cross-cultural definition of the oral epic which ignores such features as 'length', 'elevated language' and 'aristocratic setting' which Homeric and related scholarship had long promoted as the inalienable qualities of the genre. According to him,

An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a person or persons endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists (p. 34).

This carefully-worded definition, a revision for this new paperback edition of the less precise formulation in the 1979 original, neatly accommodates all the known forms and manifestations of the genre in all human cultures—the long and the short, the historical and the romantic, as well as the secondary and the primary. In this discussion of the resources of what we can now see as African manifestations of a universal genre, Okpewho focuses on the bardic tradition itself as well as on various histrionic and musical resources at the disposal of the bards and the complexities of their relationships with their society. Against this background, ch. iii focuses on the image and social relevance of the hero, revealing both the endocultural features of the African heroic image and its consistency with the heroic monomyth or hero-pattern revealed through the comparative study of the hero in other oral epic traditions across the world.

In ch. iv, 'On form and structure', and ch. v, 'Elements of the oral narrative style', Okpewho addresses the issue of composition-in-performance which is the central concern of the book. Chapter iv begins by stressing the need, in any examination of 'the art of composition of the oral epic', to 'bear constantly in mind the moment of performance—with music, histrionic resources, emotional relationship between singer and audience—which makes this tradition of art different from the literate variety' (p. 135). The rest of the chapter and the whole of ch. v are concerned with providing varied illustrations of these processes from the formal organization of themat-

ic elements and the selection, deployment and articulation of various verbal, generally formulaic elements in such a way as to draw attention away from 'the rather augustan standards of judgement established by generations of scholars nourished by the scribal culture' (p. 239) to the perception of an oral poetics which requires that scholars pay 'closer attention' to the 'stylistic nuances' which are all too clearly inalienable features of performance.

The preface (pp. ix-xiv) and the 'Conclusion' (ch. vi, pp. 240-43) state the wider theoretical setting of the book, respectively outlining the controversy over the existence of the epic in Africa and calling attention to wider perspectives on the study of African oral arts and traditional culture in general which have been opened by the book.

Okpewho's book can be faulted for paying too much attention to the Homeric standards for the epic which he sensibly abjured in the definition quoted above. The impression created by this is that of an unyielding fetishization of the Greek evidence which tends to undercut the cross-cultural performance aesthetics approach which is the book's main claim to originality. But this seems rather understandable given the centrality of the Homeric standards in the Eurocentric arguments on the non-existence of the epic in Africa which were, in the first place, the *agent provocateur* of the book. Much more worrying is the opportunity lost in the production of this paperback edition in bringing the book up-to-date in the light of new materials on the epic in Africa, including field collections by Okpewho himself, which have been published since 1979. It is difficult to judge whether this failure is due to pressure of time or cost-constraints from the publisher.

In general, revisions have been largely minimal and even cosmetic. Errors in Greek texts appear to have been carefully emended for those who still read Classical Greek, and, respecting the rapidly growing force of feminist opinion across the world, the word 'man' has in places been replaced by 'person' to avoid an anti-feminist perspective. But a few cases of confusing usage, such as 'cultural epics' (p. 88) stare us in the face, and the sensitive reader cannot but wonder where examples of 'non-cultural epics' can be found.

All told, this new paperback edition is less of a revised edition than a re-presentation of the original text in a form in which it can be more readily accessible to scholars and general readers. But, regrettably, even this offering does not make the book accessible to teachers and students of African oral literature in Africa itself where the debt crisis and stifling recession resulting from IMF policies have created a situation in which no individual can afford to buy any book published overseas, no matter how low the price. It is, however, hoped that, by some arrangement, local editions of vital scholarly books published overseas can be republished in Africa itself. Okpewho's book should be on top of any list of such books. It remains a seminal and authoritative discourse of issues in oral performance aesthetics whose value goes well

beyond the genre and the African ambience which it primarily addresses.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE

ROBIN LAW: *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on an African society.* (Oxford Studies in African Affairs.) xii, 376 pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. £45.

This excellent book is the result of long immersion in scattered collections of published and unpublished sources in several European languages. As the author signalled in his article: 'Problems of plagiarism, harmonization and misunderstanding in contemporary European sources: early (pre-1680s) sources for the "Slave Coast" of West Africa', in *Paideuma*, 33, 1987, 337–68, these sources are outstandingly difficult to use. Almost without exception their authors hectically plagiarized one another without acknowledgement; and in one way or another all of them fantasized, distorted, misunderstood and polemicized about what they had seen, experienced or heard.

The physical area European traders called the Slave Coast—roughly the area of modern south-eastern Ghana, Togo, Benin and south-western Nigeria—presents a no less daunting problem for a scholar. 'The Slave Coast' is fairly obviously a regional name conferred by outsiders; but it is an area that in many other respects displays no underlying sense of uniformity. While the region's climate, topography and vegetation is broadly similar—its entire littoral lies roughly on the 6° north line of latitude—that is where its coherence ends. Any attempt at historical reconstruction has to overcome a serious dilemma; the region was never a political unity. It comprised a large number of autonomous political communities even if many of these states' inhabitants spoke languages that modern linguistic scholarship now tends to regard as dialectically related. Lastly, much of the published material, ancient and modern, has 'used' the region rather than studied it. It, and especially its most famous kingdom, Dahomey, has been deployed as concrete evidence supporting a variety of hypothesis; these have ranged from an insistence upon the inherent brutality of African kingship to a no less powerful assertion that these same kings were essentially struggling to protect their subjects from the intervention of the Atlantic economy. It is therefore a brave and well-equipped scholar who fishes in these waters. Fortunately Robin Law is both.

The book ends with the rise and consolidation of the great state of Dahomey in the eighteenth century. What is so admirable about this volume is the preceding account of the gestation of that state. The more limited work of earlier scholars suggested that the political disorder that the Atlantic slave trade unleashed in the area created the space and conditions in which a powerful state could emerge. But little of it has looked with any-

thing like the meticulous care deployed here at the political, economic and social structures which that disorder tore apart.

Law shows that the impact of the slave trade on the region was a complex matter whose analysis cannot rest solely upon what we have now come to call 'the numbers game'. Trade with Europeans paradoxically stimulated economic growth in the area whilst the export of unfree labour served to undermine that very growth. Slave trading rested ultimately on violence, a violence which was commercialized by the rise of the export trade in slaves. Inter-state wars and banditry were authors of that violence and disorder but were also the logical products of an insecurity made even more threatening by the dissemination of imported firepower. As Law neatly puts it: 'In Dahomey... it is not easy to determine whether the bandit gang has turned itself into a state, or the state turned to banditry' (p. 346).

But part of the richness of this fine book is the author's rejection of mono-causal explanations of why Dahomey happened. Firstly he sets the decline of some of the regions older powers like Allada and the rise of Dahomey in a broader West African setting in which the rise of Akwamu to the west and of Oyo to the east played a significant part. Secondly and most originally, he shows that earlier views of Dahomey as an entirely novel structure display ignorance of what went before. It was more obviously centralized, autocratic and militarized than its regional predecessors. But it had a great deal in common in terms of ideology and organization with the polities it shrugged aside or conquered. While it constructed itself within the specificity of the near anarchy created by the slave trade, the building blocks were manifestly of local African construction.

In a period when pre-colonial African historians begin to look like a seriously endangered species, it is exciting to be reminded of their importance. Law makes a fundamental and original Africanist construction to the larger debate on the nature of the slave trade, a debate dominated to some extent by scholars ignorant of such detailed regional histories. He also demonstrates how persuasive and detailed accounts of the pre-colonial African world can be constructed by sheer hard work and informed analysis. Law has written one of the very best studies of a pre-colonial African kingdom. This is an accessible book that eschews posturing technicality. It is a scrupulously honest book in which every conclusion is supported by visible evidence and in which gaps are openly acknowledged. In short it is exceptionally good history. It is also a model which one hopes others will seek to emulate.

RICHARD RATHBONE

JEAN and JOHN COMAROFF: *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa. Vol. 1.* xx, 414 pp. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. \$60 (paper \$18.95).