

THE AFRICAN EPIC: A MEANS FOR DEFINING THE GENRE

Christiane Seydou

Translation by Katheryn Wright

While an epic text is fairly easy to discern, it is difficult to define the genre itself. The ability to recognize an epic is developed principally through a certain emotive quality inherent to the genre. When attempting to define that quality however, one is hampered by preconceived ethical, esthetic, and emotional associations which impede objective analysis. And yet, one strives to obtain this objectivity in order to identify the special characteristics which may uphold the epic as a distinct literary genre.

The following study proposes that instead of trying to avoid the emotive quality of the epic, we should, on the contrary, recognize it as a distinguishing feature. It is perhaps the affective, esthetic and cultural impact of the epic which best reveals its function and justifies its form.

Definitions gleaned from dictionaries provide us with a certain number of constants. Some deal with context, others with its literary treatment. Thus, one finds terms such as "hero," "great deeds," "great and heroic actions," or "interesting and memorable." Other definitions speak of "narrative" and "narration," "poems," and "verse." Finally, to translate the objective of the epic, one finds the verb "to commemorate." Since

these characteristics are rather vague, authors try to further sharpen the focus on the contours of the genre. For the most part, however, one ascertains a kind of powerlessness in trying to positively identify any distinguishing features: either they arrive at a negative delineation by contrasting the epic with other genres, or they resort to some form of syncretic fusion. For example, *Littre* relies on Marmontel's Encyclopedia article which states that the epic "differs from the story..., the dramatic poem..., the didactic poem..., and from historical records." *Le Petit Robert*, on the other hand, describes the epic as a hybrid genre or "a long poem in which the supernatural is mixed with the true, the legend with history...."¹ Dumézil regards the epic as a genesis: "The epic is pregnant with literary genres... which more or less distinguish themselves from the epic at an early stage."²

Instead, therefore, of focusing upon the epic's inherent characteristics which could distinguish it from other genres, it would seem that we have resorted to defining its superficial features through references to other literary genres. This hesitation to define the epic as a distinct genre in itself reflects the discomfort which arises in attempting to subject the epic to a self-contained, purely textual analysis.

Perhaps the African epic can assist in dealing with this discomfort by exposing us to the living sources of the genre and thus lead us to a more direct appreciation of the epic's truly distinctive features.³

Africa provides two important contributions to the study of the epic: first--and this is essential--the epic (as the etymology of the word indicates) remains a **living, spoken** act of expression in those societies

where orality still dominates. Its function and total expression can therefore be observed in its natural setting. Second, comparing the cultural similarities, and especially the variations observed in totally different cultures, should reveal those distinctive qualities inherent in the epic genre. These two ongoing situations seem particularly favorable for an optimal understanding of the epic. Accordingly, we have taken epics from both West and Central Africa as our field of investigation.⁴

The work of African authors concerned with the epic exhibits a similar definitional uncertainty. Specifically, the epic is placed between or on the outskirts of other genres. For example, Massa M. Diabaté states that "the epic is situated between history and myth." Eno Belinga proposes that the epic is "on the borders of history and the myth."⁵

The first common point of reference for both the Mandinka epic and the Camerounian **mvét** can therefore be found in this notion of myth accompanying history. This association in the epic in fact extends to a more general phenomenon, that of the literary treatment of collective knowledge and the reconstruction of reality intended for cultural assimilation. Thus, in the West African epic, history may serve as a catalyst in the transformation of fact into ideology, or in the **mvét**, an epic based on mythology, myth may project an image of society and its history. This idea is explained perfectly by Massa M. Diabatés as follows:

The epic is situated **between history and the myth**. Recapitulating an historic fact, it attributes **the entire cultural experience of a society** to one character who has made a mark on his time... and derives **all past and present values** of that society from this character, thus rendering the epic a **source**

of **identity** serving to distinguish that group from others. (our emphasis)⁵

Another author, Essone Atome Omgoane, believes that in presenting "the rupture of the cosmogonic structure of power, the **mvet** humanizes that power and demonstrates the means by which the world was created. It consequently proposes an immortal meta-society around which human society organizes itself and thus imitates."⁶ For one author, therefore, the epic is the crystallization of "all cultural attributes of a given society," and for the other, it acts as a meta-society. With these views of the epic in mind, it should be possible to analyse Indo-European epics whose modes of expression and ultimate objectives were perhaps not, in their day, that distant from the still living African epic.

The epic's richness emanates from this cultural concentration which in turn explains the complexity of the genre. It is the intertwined network of elements present in other genres (tale, myth, symbol, proverb, historical account, poetry, etc.) as well as the various levels of relationship to the world (mythical, religious, historical, sociological, political, ethic...) which direct and give meaning to the narrative. For the epic is the genre which concentrates a maximum of cultural data and organizes it into a precise form involving both a **semantic** and a **pragmatic** operation: that of symbolizing an **identity** and that of **calling this identity to life** in the heart of the **community** it defines. Depending on the culture, it is this objective which leads the epic, in a more or less pronounced fashion toward the myth or history. The diversity of African epics is the result of "the distinctive features of one people in relation to another." More than any other literary genre, epics are condi-

tioned by the conception that each group has of its own cultural or national identity. Thus one encounters a broad range of texts such as the **mvét** of Cameroun or Gabon, and the **Mwindo** epic of the Banyanga. In the case of the **Lianja** of the Nkundo-Mongo people of Zaire, epic narratives are founded upon a whole symbolic repertoire in which the hero-civilizers embark upon long, complicated journeys of initiation. Whereas the relationship of these epic texts to the myth, tale, and legend are clearly marked, the West African epics (Mandinka, Peul, Bambara, Soninké, etc.) are founded upon historical realities. Arising from the historical origins of the Mandé people, the Mandinka epic of **Sunjata**, for example, reinterprets their history in myth for reasons of better endorsing that history. Peul and Bambara epics, however, do not present any mythical transpositions but establish their roots in reality which is then recomposed into a more political perspective. Often they concern heroes and historical facts which are relatively recent, even common to both groups, and are therefore very similar in regard to content. The Bambara epic, dealing with the establishment and maintenance of power in the kingdom of Segou, is more ethical and ideological in nature. That of the Peul exalts the virtues of **pulaaku**, personified in the heroes who people the epic.

In spite of these more or less pronounced tendencies, it is evident that even in the most "historical" of epic narratives, the subject matter is not treated in the manner of a "chronicle" but is characterized by a certain relationship to time which is particular to it. Although it would seem that the epic narrative should follow a chronological ordering of events, there are numerous examples which illustrate otherwise.

On the one hand, there may be either a distortion in the sequence of the most determinate actions (cf. the presentation of single combats in the Peul and Bambara epics where, instead of an alternating exchange of blows, the confrontation consists of a triple succession of separate blows) or a telescoping of time (thus causing the mythic origins of the Mandé to be joined with the historical establishment of the empire of Sunjata). On the other hand, the epic may present attenuated actions which are then redistributed in time in the form of prediction, or narration of their occurrence or outcome etc. All of these literary techniques imply that epic is not destined to reproduce and transmit history chronologically as it was in reality and in the causative sequence of facts, but rather that it is projected toward a cultural or ideological reinterpretation of these facts. Because of the epic's objectives, this reinterpretation propels history out of the ordinary temporal system in order to reorganize time, its duration and the succession of its events so as to render the facts themselves significant. Similar to the type of atemporality found in the myth, this is not only an attempt at manipulating time, but at transforming reality into a symbolic code. The cultural precepts of a given community are therefore organized around the models created in this meaningful reconstruction of history and of myth.

Nonetheless, if the epic is not history--subject of knowledge, attempt to comprehend events through analysis of their context, antecedents, and their outcomes--it is not myth either--subject of faith or belief founded on the symbolic system of the society from which it emanates. As Massa M. Diabaté has indicated, it is essentially a subject of recognition.

The epic awakens the notion of cultural identity at the same time as the pursuit of this identification. Even more than the $\gamma\upsilon\omega\sigma\tau\varsigma$, the epic is a $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\epsilon\varsigma$, for it is not simply a narrative of reference, a bearer of information or meaning in relation to that known and recognized identity, but in presenting a source of identification, the epic impels the auditor to become intimately involved in his own personal objectives.

Anyone who has witnessed a performance of the African epic cannot remain insensitive to either the communal character or to the specific features of this cultural manifestation: its **engaging vitality**, and its capacity to unite an audience through **intense excitement**. To a great extent, this excitement or exaltation is created by the **specific manner of performing recognized ideological themes** and elements of the group's **collective knowledge**.

In essence, the entire matter is subject to this special **mode of performance**. For, although the ideology represented contains a determinate value in itself, it is only in enacting this ideology in **epic** format that it becomes a **motivating force**. It is therefore the **modes** of performance, the **objectives** and the **effects** of this genre which are suitable for definition and analysis.

To conduct this investigation it has been useful to set up a comparative table of two radically different types of African epics: the Peul epic of the Massina region in Western Sahel, the the Gabonese **mvét** of Central Africa's forested region. In spite of the most evident dissimilarities, this method should permit us to specifically determine what binds these two literary productions into a single and unique genre, and subsequently, what distinguishes the epic from other genres. If we have used the Peul epics of Mas-

sina for reference instead of the well known Mandinka epic, it is not only because the former is more familiar to us, but because we prefer to leave **Sunjata** to the talents of Gordon Innes. Furthermore, the Peul have apparently borrowed the epic genre from neighboring Bambara peoples, and, by the very fact that it has been borrowed, there is a better opportunity to discover the strong points, and the manner of articulating the form and meaning which were probably undertaken by the borrowers as characteristic of this genre.

The following table presents various formal, textual, and functional aspects of the epics we have chosen to examine. Briefly, these include: the sociological status of the artist, the organisation and conditions of the performance, content, stylistics, and finally the function of this literary genre.

Sociological status of the artist

-The griot, a man of caste belongs by birth to an endogamous professional class.

-No specific initiation rites. Formula training in the art is sufficient.

-No professional insignia (except for the traditional musical instrument).

-The **mvét** player is a free man; anyone capable is permitted to become a player and reciter of the **mvét**.

-Rites of initiation (linked to divine revelation of origin) parallel professional apprenticeship.

-Special costume of ritual composed of various symbolic elements.

Musical accompaniment

-Single instrument: **hoddu**, lute of three or four strings (after which the genre is named).

-Instrument: **mvét**, harp-lute (after which the genre is named).

-Percussion: sticks rapped together, bells....

-Preferably a single griot plays the **hoddu** and recites for a better combination of word and music.

-Immobility and passivity of artist, seated on the ground; neither gesture nor mime are used.

-Rhythmic but monotone declamation without paralinguistic effects. Great sobriety in the use of vocal resources.

-Chorus

-The reciter likes, even prefers (cf. Zwé Nguéma) to be supported in his role as musician by another **mbet** player so as to have free reign over his movements.

-Extreme mobility of the artist: gesture, dance, mime, theatricalization of narrative.

-Very expressive declamation with studied pursuit of all paralinguistic effects. Expressionism pushed to excess: shouts, onomatopoeia, and extreme emphasis on intonations.

Formal structure of the narrative

-Well defined episodic narratives, each episode forming an autonomous whole. Even if the same griot recounts the entire cycle of a single hero in succession, each episode is independent, and constructed accordingly.

-No digressions even between distinct changes in episodes. Transitions are provided by the continuity of musical theme.

-Brief musical interludes which punctuate the narrative structure constant-

-Single narrative constructed on a linear plan but interspersed with digressive interludes (songs, reflexions, anecdotes) which are totally outside of the narrative itself. In spite of these interruptions, the narrative is picked up exactly where it was left off, and the episodes follow one another smoothly.

-With participation of both chorus and audience, the musical interludes

ly focus attention on the principal hero since it is his musical theme being played.

(instrumental and vocal) which take place during the interruptions, digress from the narrative and create a source of diversion and entertainment.

Content

-Narrative follows personalized history:

- Historical context with reference points in:
 - time,
 - space (terrestrial; geographically limited)
 - the protagonists (real people who are, by their geneology, placed in a historical line of descendants).

-Confrontations:

- rivalry between equals: chiefs or 'sons of chiefs';
- rebellion of vassal against lord,
- quest of human glory and renown.

Mainspring for action: **transgression**

Protagonists:

- real, historical, and well characterized heroes along with certain other archetyped characters;
- the hero's actions illustrate his personal

-Narrative follows mythic history.

• Non-referential mythic content:

- atemporal,
- situated in unlimited cosmic space which includes all natural elements.
- protagonists: symbolic and mythic characters who, through their geneology, are placed in the mythic history of the creation of the Cosmos.

- rivalry between unequal characters: Mortals and Immortals:
- rebellion and aggression
- quest of immortality.

• unreal, fantastic heroes; very little distinctive characterization;

• the hero's actions only exemplify his magic

characteristics and virtues. His magic powers are auxiliary and used only on occasion. The action is determined by the personality and will of the hero.

powers, equal or superior to those of his adversary. Characters are invested with supernatural powers which seem inherent. The action is simply a confrontation of magical powers rather than one between individualized characters.

-The action is of an ethic and psychological nature.

-The action is cosmic and mythic in nature.

-Linear structure of action: the action's relevance is centered upon the pivotal character in question. He performs the event and at the same time time symbolizes it.

-Cumulative structure of action at several levels of meaning. Symbolic significance: characters are only players in the events whose meaning surpasses them.

-Time: a restructuring of the chronological order of key events.

-Time: respect for the chronological order of events.

-Space: restricted and condensed: precise, limited locality.

-Space: exploded spatial plan: characters pass from one universe to another.

Style

-Simple and sober style of ordinary narration which contrasts with the expressive poetic style of certain devices and fixed formula.

-Style marked by excessiveness: accumulation and effusion of verbal resources, and unbridled fantasy. Devices and formula embellished with imagery.

-Subtle, reserved manner of narration reduced to essentials: preference for the suggested and implied.

-Studied pursuit of excess, redundancy, and the exoteric.

Effects of style on the audience

-Audience pays close attention as a result of the effort to perceive and understand the meaning through the veil of allusions.

-Communion of public in this interiorized excitement and participation.

-Effect of the performance on the individual: the epic acts as a collective symbol which motivates and directs the individual toward a common objective. This insures the cohesion of the group in spite of its physical dispersion.

-Attention of the audience carried along by the verbal deluge and excessive nature of expressionism.

Communion of public in this exteriorized enthusiasm and participation.

-Effect of the performance on the group: the epic is a rite of social communion which recalls the groups mythic and cosmic dimensions in order to revitalize and strengthen its foundations.

Behavior of the audience

-Silence, attentive and contemplative immobility of audience concentrated on listening. They manifest tense but silent excitement. Intense but passive participation.

-Impression of interiorized communion in their reaching toward an intimate relationship with the hero and the ideology evoked.

-Exuberant and extroverted audience which is constantly called upon by the reciter and which thus expresses itself frequently. Active and noisy participation.

-Impression of exteriorized communion between the members of the group who reinstate their sense of community through the solidarity of the occasion.

Function

-Solidarity regenerated by the renewed feeling of cultural and ideological identity proposed in the text.

-By means of the restrained and personal enthusiasm experienced by the individual, the **hoddu** rekindles the ethico-psychological ideology of the group. This ideology is at the foundation of Peul identity, or **pulaaku**, upon which the unity of the group rests, in spite of its dispersed nature.

-The Peul epic appears to at as a means of identity to the group by reducing the numbers of distinguishing characters to a minimum. As a consequence, the group identifies itself through interior precepts which the epic performance reestablishes in the individual. In addition, it creates a personal desire to render these means of recognition permanent.

-Reaffirmation of identity and social unity through the solidarity experienced in the celebration.

-Through the active participation in the festivity, the **mvèt** rekindles the solidarity of the group's socio-political structures, which, in turn, are reflections of the mythic models.

-The Gabonese epic broadens the perspective in which the group recognizes its identity: in depth, time, space, and in the reenactment of the myth of Creation. It is the group's unanimous participation in this exercise of renewal which insures its cohesion as a social and cultural entity.

In reading such a table, one is left confused by the number of differences, discrepancies, and oppositions especially when faced with the relatively few similarities. Nonetheless, this diversity can be

resolved when considering the three principal points of convergence:

-the association of the spoken word to a specific musical instrument;

-the basis of action in the narrative: transgression;

-the function of this cultural manifestation.

Indeed, these three points seem to be the key to understanding the epic genre in this part of Africa.

In both cases, there is an obligatory association between the spoken word and the musical instrument whose importance is witnessed by the very fact that it is the instrument which gives its name to the epic genre. Eno Belinga underscores the importance of this coincidence in these terms:

1. The Mvet designates first of all a stringed musical instrument,...

2. Second, the Mvet designates an epic or any epic song which is accompanied by the above mentioned instrument.

3. Finally, the Mvet designates a well defined literary genre. It is an ancient and complete drama which combines epic literature with music and traditional choreography...⁷

We are aware of the role which the *kora* and *balafon* play in the Mandinka epic, the *ngoni* for the Bambara, the *gâbare* for the Soninké etc. Looking back to the example of the Peul epic, the importance of music (and of the *hoddu*) is demonstrated in its close association with the griot, the lute, the device, and the epic. In essence, this illustrates the activating force of the spoken work and of its musical substitute on the participant.

Much of the epic's strength as a motivating force is gained through the power of the spoken word. Likewise, the spoken work (*parole*) is particularly well exploited in another African literary genre: the

device. The device is a concise and valorizing definition (often metaphorical and paroxysmal) of a person, place, abstract entity, etc. The purpose of the device is to call forth and compel this person in question to conform to this definition of himself, a sublimated image of his fulfilled essence. In another essay, we have studied the nature, function, and style of the device, and its evocation and invocation of the person,⁸ and presented the reasons which cause us to believe that the epic functions as a "collective device."⁹

It is certainly true that one does find devices in epic texts. What is more important in this case is the predominant role of the musical device, which operates in the same manner as that of the verbal device, in addition to having an identical function. In fact, this musical refrain in the Peul epic emphasizes the functional aspect of the genre itself. Throughout the narration, the *hoddu* plays the musical device of the hero in question, or of someone else who represents the qualities of *pulaaku*. This musical device serves as a backdrop on which can be grafted several conventional and complimentary musical themes (riding calvacades, drums of combat, etc.) or various descriptive themes which may act as highlights to the action. Moreover, the device is the thematic foundation which, played between each episode and sequence, continually serves to refocus the narrative and the audience's attention on the hero and the values he incarnates.

Music in the Peul epic operates not simply as accompaniment to the spoken word, but as the very source of it. Alone, it can express what the narrative only further develops. As of the opening notes, the audience recognizes the hero's device, and feels the weight of its entire significance.

Although somewhat redundant the verbal explication of the musical device is a keen source of enjoyment in that it rekindles the pleasures of rediscovery (of the hero, and of the qualities of **pulaaka** set into motion by his actions). It is this act of rediscovery which confirms and sharpens the collective knowledge upon which the culture of the group is founded. For each individual then, the verbal explication not only acts to renew the consciousness of his identity, but also to reconfirm the unity of the group which recognizes itself in that identity.

The basic analogy between the epic and the device (linked by the **hoddu**) is also confirmed by the fact that the **maabuube** a specialized, socio-professional group of griots, have exclusive rights to these two genres and their accompanying musical instruments. To be sure, the narrative illustrating the hero's deeds and virtues is an essential element of the group's culture. But, going beyond the power of semantics, it is the associative aspect of the musical device which points to the real function of the narrative. When the same narrative is recounted without musical support, it loses its epic character, becoming an interesting anecdote which functions simply as entertainment, or which conveys information. Since the story being told is most often known by the entire audience, this function alone would be restricted, if not altogether invalid. The true objective of the epic lies on another level: it is less a question of transmitting knowledge than of **utilizing this knowledge** which, presented in a special form, and confided to the artist's talents, aims at revitalizing the group's **consciousness of its distinct identity, unity, and cohesion** through interiorized communion.

The epic therefore implements a wide range of techniques to inspire and maintain an awareness of a common identity. In order for the $\gamma\upsilon\omega\sigma\tau\zeta$ to be transformed into a $\mu\pi\tilde{\alpha}\lambda\tau\zeta$, the narrative alone is not sufficient. The stimulant of music is needed which, acting itself as a device, orients the character of the narrative. Just as an individual's device influences him by its style and paroxymal effect, the Peul epic narrative depends on this notion of paroxysm. Epic heroes are presented as excessive, outside of the norms, and essentially inimitable (without which they would undoubtedly lose their epic stature). It is evident that the epic does not present model characters or behavior patterns to emulate, nor does it illustrate the exemplary and pedagogical aspects of the tale. Rather, the epic seeks to inspire an awakening of intense consciousness and sustained will as much by the content of the text as through mediums for expressing it.

Within the structure of the narrative, this notion of **paroxysm** takes the form of **transgression** and all transgression involves the crossing of a threshold, which, in itself, authorizes a certain intensification. Here, transgression is manifest in several forms:

1. Transgression in its etymological sense of passage from one world to another, of intrusion into a universe to which one does not belong, or of the appropriation of certain attributes of that universe. This can be seen in the attempts to conquer immortality in the *mvét*, or, in the Bambara epic, by the taking of a piece of meat by Bilissi in the Ségou market.

2. Transgression of a rule of conduct which can take the form of an act of social, religious, or political rebellion; for example, the refusal to pay tribute to one's lord or to observe existing religious practices.

3. Transgression of behavioral norms which govern and assure harmony in a society: the disdain for laws of

hospitality, or failure to observe other conventional practices in social relations (such as the slapping of the griot by which Silâmaka upsets his own destiny), etc.

Transgression which at times takes the form of provocation emerges as the focal point of all action in the epic and in turn is the source of its dynamism and meaning.

In the logical context of the narrative, transgression is generally initiated by a **defiant challenge** and always ends in an **unpredictable situation**. This unforeseeable situation is the key to all epic narratives. It provides the context in which the intrinsic qualities of the epic hero can be effectively expressed, and is at the same time conditioned and even provoked by those same qualities. In the structure of the narrative it is both a means and an end; on the level of semantics and of action this situation provides the context for simultaneously identifying and fulfilling the epic hero, himself a manifestation of the identity and unity of the group.

Further analysis of the themes, stylistics, and structure present in the epic is beyond the scope of this exposé. It must be remembered that the particular character of an epic is conditioned by the conception that each group has of its identity. Some groups derive their identity and distinctive characteristics from their mythology where the organizing principles of the society are established by a hero-civilizer (such as Mwindo), or orchestrated from a world of Immortals (as in the *mvét*).⁶ Other groups such as the Mandinka and the Bambara find the roots of their special identity in their history and territorial acquisitions. Still others, such as the Peul, who are geographically dispersed and have diverse histories, seek their common identity in the ethico-social nature of common behavioral

modes--in certain distinctive qualities manifest in the personal adventures of several well defined and very human heroes.

The epic contains the following standard features:

- narration;
- action focused around highly personalized heroes or archetypes;
- unpredictable situations which present components of group identity either externally through socio-political/historical forms, or internally through the intrinsic personality of the hero.

Beyond these common features, one finds a wide variety of epic texts both in content and forms of expression, but whose particular traits do permit indentifying them as belonging to the epic genre. For the distinguishing character of the epic is derived less from the text itself than from its function as an act of the spoken word destined to re-enact the founding of an ideological and cultural identity of common unity.

One can attempt to distinguish the formal and structural properties of the epic from those of other genres practised in a given culture, but such analysis commonly reveals only those attributes which the culture has chosen to utilize in order to enable the epic text to fulfill its ultimate goal and function efficiently. It is only when the reality of the epic's orientation is recognized that the study of textual strategies may become valid, and therefore justified.

Thus, the cultural importance of the epic becomes clearly apparent, particularly as a medium for cultural, social, political, and national mobilization. This in turn explains why the epic plays a part in the socio-political system in many societies (a genre whose presentation is sometimes reserved for a socioprofessional class or re-

quiring initiation). At the same time its fate has oftentimes become uncertain since it may find favor or be suppressed in accordance with the historical and political circumstances. Finally, there is the great vitality of the epic which led Eno Belinga to declare that the *mvvet*, while "deeply rooted in the past, is an art essentially turned toward the future."⁵

The epic therefore seems to define itself primarily through reference to its function and ultimate purpose. It is this finality which can account for the diversity in the textual and formal character of the epic genre, as well as for its fitting into the general category of acts of the spoken word.

This broad categorization only further illustrates the complexity of analysing spoken genres within the framework of oral literatures. The epic genre cannot be distinguished simply in terms of--to borrow from Tzvetan Todorov, "the codification of discursive properties" or "the logic of mutual relationships among the constituent elements of the work." Reference must be made to extra-textual cultural elements such as the association of the text to music, its mode of expression to the intended audience, and its designated function in society as a cultural manifestation to be appreciated in its entirety.

NOTES

1. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, vol.2.
Epic: 1. Narrative in verse of great and heroic actions....
Primitive epics: poems in which certain peoples commemorated their gods and heroes, before the advent of literary culture.

2. The epic poem subjected to rules, with its fantasy, its episodes, is the imitation, or narration of an interesting and memorable act; thus the epic differs from: history, which recounts without imitating; the dramatic poem, which illustrates in action; the didactic poem, which is a web of precepts; and from historical records in verse, which are composed of a series of events without unity (**Marmontel, Éléments de littérature**).

Le Petit Robert:

Epic: long poem (and later, narrative in prose of elevated style) in which the fantastic is mixed with the real, the legend with history, and whose objective is to commemorate a hero or a great event.

2. G. Dumézil, **Mythe et épopée**, I, Paris, Gallimard, N.R.F. 1968, p. 19.

3. We are here assuming the existence of African epics without having treated the general question of genres and their distribution in diverse cultures. If we have classified these texts under a common rubric, it is because they occupy an equivalent position in the cultures which produce them, and fulfill a similar function.

4. We have not dealt with the rich production of Swahili epics because of the scope of this study, and more importantly, because of the impact of Islamic culture on the great majority of Utenzi texts.

5. Massa Makan Diabaté, **Essai critique sur l'épopée mandingue** (thèse de Doctorat de troisième cycle, Université de Paris I), p. 648. Eno Belinga, **L'épopée camerounaise, Mvet** (a work published in conjunction with the University of Yaoundé by the centre d'Édition et de Production Pour l'Enseignement et la Recherche 1978), p. 39.

6. D. Essone Atome Ongoane, **Société et méta-société** (the Fang political system), (Thèse pour le Doctorat de troisième cycle, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales 1980).

7. Eno Belinga, op. cit., p. II.

8. Christiane Seydou, "La devise dans la culture peule: évocation et invocation de la personne" in G. Calame-Griaule (ed.), **Language et cultures africaines**, Paris, Maspero 1977, 187-264.

9. Christiane Seydou, **Silâmaka et Poullôri, récit épique peul**, Paris, A. Colin 1972, Coll. Classiques africaines, 13, 277p., 3 records.

This article, originally entitled "Comment définir le genre épique? Un exemple: l'épopée africaine," first appeared in **Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford (JASO)**, XIII/1, 1982.