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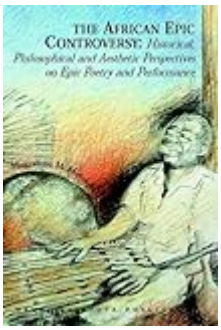

Mugyabuso M. Mulokozi. *The African Epic Controversy: Historical, Philosophical, and Aesthetic Perspectives on Epic Poetry and Performances.* Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2002. xviii + 550 pp. $49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-9987-686-29-2.

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Had this book been published soon after the author presented his thesis in 1986, it would have been a valuable, if not entirely ground-breaking, contribution to the study of African epic traditions, and the reference to controversy in the title would have been more appropriate. Sixteen years later, much of that discussion has lost its relevance. The controversy is long since dead, buried by two anthologies of African epics and various studies of the genre, including a book by the author of this review. One question, in approaching this work, thus becomes: what is its current contribution to the study of African epic traditions?

Naturally, the answer is not simple. This study does not add much to the general discourse on epic, in part because the references are still largely grounded in the pre-1986 terms of the author's original work.[1] (This observation may be a reflection of the sad fact that while popular music and fashions spread around the world at electronic speed, scholarly work is far slower to reach African libraries.) However, the study's documentation of Haya epic traditions is a valuable contribution to the known corpus, and the material it presents (four epic texts) does in some ways challenge the orthodox view of African epic, including assumptions about its distribution and the patterns of versification.

In pre-colonial times, the BaHaya kingdoms occupied a territory on the southwest shores of Lake Victoria-Nyanza (Lake Lweru on Mulokozi's maps), tucked in among the larger kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, and Rwanda. The BaHaya kingdoms shared some of the broader cultural features of the region (e.g. a mythical history involving the god- or spirit-kings known as the BaChwezi, now the subject of spirit-cults, institutions such as individual praise-poetry, royal clans) but also specialized in fishing, unlike their more cattle-oriented neighbors. The Haya epic tradition described by Mulokozi involves relatively short narratives (performance time is apparently less than an hour) performed to music by specialized performers. The instrument, the *enanga*, is a wooden zither with six to eight strings, which may or may not have resonators. Mulokozi provides notations for the themes of the epics presented in his study (pp. 75 ff).

One half of the book is devoted to description and discussion of the epic tradition; the second half presents four texts ("Mugasha," "Rukiza," "Kachwenyanja," and "Mugangala"), presented in bilingual format on facing pages, with discussion and notes. The texts are well-known examples from the corpus. Mulokozi identifies four or five recorded variants for each text, although not all the variants may have been published. Peter Seitel has published translations of three of them in his *Powers of Genre* and

Mary Ann Hoffmann, in an unpublished MA thesis, has analyzed the musical structure of the fourth, "Mugangala."[2] The texts translated by Seitel seem to have been slightly more ornate in their use of praise-terminology. Note the contrast between the opening lines of "Mugasha" in Seitel's version:

"Bahyoza, Hear the Epic of Bitankwama Little Feet of the Kafunzi Bird, Nyabuleza, the Never Envious." (Seitel, p. 147)

Here are the opening lines in Mulokozi's version:

"He was deep in thought, He brooded, he brooded, He brooded, Kajubi, He brooded, Kajubi of Kajubi." (p. 217)

Mulokozi's discussion, however, is far more useful than Seitel's, because he is concerned to place the epics in a social and historical context. Seitel's goal was to play with the abstractions of narrative structure, and the BaHaya themselves are sidelined in his book. There is not a great deal of useful secondary material on the BaHaya. F. X. Lwamgira's history, *Amakuru ka Kiziba na Abakama Bamu*, has not been translated into English. Besides Seitel, there is Peter Schmidt's *Historical Archaeology*, which does offer useful chapters on the historical traditions of the region (pp. 60-110), and otherwise one goes back to colonial times: H. Rehse, one of the first to describe the traditions of the region before 1910, and P=re C=sard, who provided descriptions of the historical traditions.[3] Mulokozi's description of the context thus fills a void, at least for English-speakers. His chapters on the socio-historical context, the classification of the *enanga* tradition, the performance context, and the musical setting are all very valuable background information with which to approach the texts.

There are points on which one might disagree with his approach: his attempt to introduce class-struggles into his interpretation of the narratives, for instance (pp. 211 ff., 312 ff.), or his avoidance of the problems raised by the divine/mythical status of a hero such as Mugasha. His discussion of the "heroic conception" leads to considerations so general that the term loses all denotative value. (This is one reason why I ignored that criterion, for the purpose of definition, in my own study of African epic.) Some of his discussion of history seems a bit mechanical, reading folktale patterns too literally, and certainly he does not pay enough attention, in discussing the narratives, to the wider regional tradition. Mugasha, for instance, is not only a BaHaya hero but a regional deity, and the Hinda royalty are an external intrusion into the BaHaya world.

Questions of comparative relations also apply to the discussion of the poetic form. I am unaware of comparable epic performances among the peoples neighboring the BaHaya, although the praise-poetry tradition would seem quite similar to those of Rwanda and Ankole. The closest parallels for the epics would seem to be among the Swahili along the coast and inland (Liyongo and others). Mulokozi does not discuss this sort of relationship, but it does seem relevant. Is the prosody of the Haya epic closer to that of the dynastic poems of Rwanda or to the *utenzi* of the Swahili?

This last question brings us to what seems to me the great missed opportunity in Mulokozi's discussion of the African epic controversy. Finnegan's original dismissal, in 1970, was couched in terms of the conventional appreciation of oral epic of the time: that oral epics were long, metrical recitations composed of formulaic lines, and that she had been unable to identify such among the African examples. The importance of the formula is as a compositional tool that allows the reciter to maintain a steady metrical rhythm by easy substitutions from a pool of repetitive phrases. It has since been redefined into patterns of substitution which allow the creation of variable phrases, and this is the use to which John William Johnson and Mulokozi both put it.[4] But such a vision of the composition of the African epic eliminates the intrusive and enriching presence of established praise-names, whose very value is that they do not change (metrically) but serve to evoke an extrinsic (to the epic) social world. These praise-names seem as important in BaHaya epic as they are in the Mande epic described by Johnson, and we still have no convincing evidence for a metrically rigid epic prosody in Africa (outside literary examples). It seems to me that Mulokozi was in a position to challenge the orthodoxy on oral epics, and that he has instead simply accepted it. As a consequence, I am very grateful for what I have learned of the Haya epic tradition, but I feel the title of the book is misleading.

Notes

[1]. So, for instance, his lists of authorities on the African epic runs pn p. 2 from "Bird (1971)" to "Mulokozi (1983)," and on p. 8 from "Finnegan, 1970" to "Christiane Seydou, 1982 and 1983." There are other problems elsewhere with his references: e.g., p. 15, "Ogot 198…," "General History IV: 198…pp.***."

[2]. Peter Seitel, *The Powers of Genre: Interpreting Haya Oral Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mary Ann Hoffmann, "Mugangala: The Structure of an Enanga Performance," (M.A. thesis,

Brown University, 1986) (cited by Mulokozi; I have not seen this work).

[3]. Peter Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in an African Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978); H. Rehse. *Kiziba, Land und Leute* (Stuttgart: Strecker and Schr=der, 1910); P=re Vernon C=sard, for whom Mulokozi cites a series or articles from 1927-37 in the journal *Anthropos* but without titles or page references; I have seen only the first one, 1927: "Comment les Bahaya interpr=tent leurs origines," *Anthropos* 22 (1927), pp. 440-465. It seems curious, and unfortunate, that neither Schmidt nor Seitel list C=sard in their bibliographies. De Heusch has a short discussion of some Haya material in Luc de Heusch, *Rois n=s d'un coeur de vache: Mythes et rites bantous II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), pp. 215ff.

[4]. John William Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara according to Fadigi Sisoko* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

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