

The Epic Today

Foreword

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The epic, one of the oldest forms of poetic expression, came into being and evolved in time immemorial, long before the appearance of writing – the advent of which, while helping to fix oral traditions since the dawn of history, has at the same time sapped these traditions of their freshness. Not until methods of recording and reproduction were perfected was the oral epic restored to its full compass as a work of enduring dimensions.

Whether oral or written, epics – like all literary creations, myths, folk tales, fables – are most often, to varying degrees depending on the period, a hybrid of imaginary and real elements, the line between them being rather blurry. From time to time, archaeologists manage to jump-start research in the field and to buy time. The Xia dynasty, for example, has emerged from its mythological limbo to take its place in the historical arena, thanks to Chinese excavations in recent decades: the legendary reigns may be gone for good, but the heroes and their epics live on.

Also uncertain are the geographical boundaries under consideration: “East-West,” or “Oriental-Occidental,” designates all of Eurasia and the countries at its periphery, both in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. These directional pairs do not imply precise localizations in the east or west of the compass rose, but rather cultural spheres that have been defined as such in the context of long-standing UNESCO projects: *East-West* (1956-1967), *Integral Study of the Silk Routes: Routes of Dialogue*¹ (1988-1997) or again, quite recently, *Intercultural East-West Dialogue in Central Asia*, starting in 1998. This last undertaking, which continues certain research activities that were begun in the context of *Silk Routes*, will include for example *The Epic in Central Asia*.

The first contribution to this issue is one that relates the world of men to that of gods and ancestors. From this point of view, Nicole Revel calls attention to the importance of the shaman, an intermediary who plays many roles.² The shamanic sessions of the Palawan are sampled with a wealth of lively details in translations informed by the author's profound knowledge of the culture.

The model of a society with its manners and mores, its rules for living, and its values is difficult to transfer from one community to another. Often, research on transmission must be pursued beyond themes and motifs to include the consideration of linguistic particularities. The choice of certain terms allows us to understand the heroes in the context of their hierarchical and personal relations, and thus aids in deciphering a particular social code. Such is the case with the lines devoted to the death of Patroklos in the *Iliad*. The texts by Christine Leclerc and Maria Villela-Petit show how contextual analysis of a few words can reveal the underlying structure of the passage and unveil the mechanism that ties Patroklos' fate to Achilles' and undoes both of them through this fatal link of destiny.

Many themes persist throughout the centuries, appearing in various places: encounters with deities, heroic exploits, thwarted love and all the ensuing trials. Beyond the similarity of forms, what really counts is the rhythm used to bring the human into harmony with the divine. As François Macé emphasizes, this point is particularly germane in the case of the Ainu, whose oral tradition survives on its own without the aid of manuscripts or musical scores. In this sense it is similar to the epics of inland Asia or Siberia, as well as to those of southern China and the South Pacific, but it remains distinct from those of its southern neighbors,³ although the Shintô tradition goes farther back: the influence of the epic can be felt in the ancient prayers and the roots of *Nô* theater, of *Bunraku* puppet theater, and, since the seventeenth century, of *Kabuki*, teeming with ghosts and heroes.

Quite a different case is seen in that of the Khmer epic, as attested by modern romances, which Solange Thierry uses as a means of tracing the oral form. Their themes are still epic and are influenced in the highest degree by the Indian tradition. The epic to the glory of Râma is also an extreme case of the play of influences; happily this

epic bears witness to "a virtual transfusion of inspiration, with the integration of specific matter belonging to local 'heritage.'"

The problem of cultural identity is vividly set forth in two of the essays: the study of this mechanism may well render obsolete the often contestable and always superficial results of simplistic analysis of endogenous or exogenous elements, for a large number of multiple influences are masked by reciprocal local influences.

The first example is treated by Catherine Servan-Schreiber. In eastern India, the Terai region played a major role as a commercial nexus linking Bihar to Nepal. Exported along traders' routes, the epics spread out over a whole network, with each of the border cultures participating significantly in the parallel exchange of goods and songs.

The second example is that of the migration of heroic cycles in the Arab-Islamic sphere, in particular, the tales of the Hilalians. This epic of nomadic pastors on the route from Medina to Mecca is infused with an element of banditry. In the ninth century, the migrants reached Egypt, and in the thirteenth century they spread all over northern Africa. Displaced, buffeted by circumstance, victors and vanquished, they left a trail not only in Egypt but also from Syria to Morocco and from the Mediterranean to the Niger. Their "desert epic," a living oral tradition, illustrates the vicissitudes of exile. Micheline Galley's text, which closes this issue, demonstrates the persistence of epic themes and the infinite variety of local versions. To this day, the tale remains incontestably faithful to history, and the relevance of virtues such as magnanimity and political courage, the supreme values of a code of conduct, is not to be ignored.

The moral relevance of living epics is effectively illustrated by Denis Matringe, who finds it in the epico-lyrical legends of the Punjab and shows the permanence of certain themes. At nightfall the itinerant bards still sing messages reflecting political inspiration and mystical echoes harking back to the Sufis of the fifteenth century. The final narrative is that of the Sikhs' political reform in the 1920s. Some of these authors have even assimilated heroic battles to their own political involvement.

In contrast to these epics based on legends or myths originating in the oral tradition is the epic of Baibars. Contemporary biogra-

phers and chroniclers wrote the true history of this thirteenth-century sultan. With Jacqueline Sublet, we move from reality to fiction. The historical figure gradually loses all connections with humans and becomes the epic hero of the *Romance of Baibars*.

It is no surprise to anyone that oral traditions, and epics in particular, are a treasure-trove of knowledge and experience. What is new is the approach to the subject. Moving beyond factual information on contents and messages, certain specialists are concentrating on changes that occur in literary motifs as they made their way along the routes. In some cases narrators pare down the epic, pruning away motifs that no longer made sense; in others, they augment it with borrowings that are integrated with their local traditions.

The study of these movements stimulates new comparisons that build bridges and bring to the fore what binds communities both near and far. An attentive observation, such as that of the transmission of messages to supernatural and natural beings, demonstrates the diplomatic talents that must be used by the shaman-negotiator. Thus contemporary oral epics, continuing to play their role, teach precious virtues and dispense advice that is so sorely needed in our day if human communication is to be improved.

The primary and pressing goal today is to rescue material scattered over five continents; we must undertake to collect and preserve it, and to establish a center for the international archives of the Spoken Word. Once this resource has been set up, there is no doubt that discoveries made in its domain will turn out to be as fascinating as the greatest archaeological finds.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. See *Diogenes* 171 (July-September 1995), *Languages and Cultures of the Silk Roads*.
2. Shamanic practices, particularly important in Siberia and Central Asia, have been well documented through the efforts of Russian ethnographers since their forays into Siberia. See in *Diogenes* 158 (April-June 1992), *Shamans and Shamanisms: On the Threshold of the Next Millenium*: V. N. Basilov, "Islamic Shamanism among Central Asian Peoples," pp. 5-18; E. A. Helimsky and N. T. Kosterkina, "Small Seances with a Great Nganasan Shaman," pp. 39-55; and R. N. Hamayon, "Stakes of the Game: Life and Death in Siberian Shamanism," pp. 69-85.
3. In the *Honshû*, the epic begins with the great exploits of a civil war whose heroes are nearly contemporaries of the authors.