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Rethinking Epic

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This article surveys the record of oral epic study, foregrounding the comparative scholarship of the "oral-formulaic" school of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, with the elaborations and refinements of their arguments especially by John Miles Foley. Further contributions both from African studies and from research in ethnolinguistics and ethnopoetics are also highlighted. The article argues that despite the brilliance of the scholarship so far in this field, there has been too much emphasis on the idea of *tradition* and too little sensitivity to the social and political realities of life among the folk who produce these epics. The article argues for greater consideration of both the contexts of performance of epic texts and especially for their historical connections with the times in which we, the present-day consumers of their messages, live.

I

Oral epic study effectively began with inquiries about the origins of Homer's major works, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. That is, who was Homer, how was he able to put together such monumental poems, and so on? Although such investigations had occupied the likes of Aristotle and Porphyry in their times (Nagy, *Homeric Questions* 1), it would seem safer to trace our tradition of scholarship to Friedrich August Wolf who, in his *Prolegomena to Homer*, took the stand that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* started life from episodes of tales about the Trojan war randomly performed by itinerant professional narrators and later collected, on the authority of the sixth century B.C. Athenian tyrant Pisistratus, into a body of texts that grew further (thanks to continued transmission) until later (Alexandrian) editors

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ordered them into the canonical wholes that have come down to us. Wolf's *Prolegomena* gave rise to a record of philological investigations, throughout the nineteenth century into the earlier twentieth century, by essentially two camps of scholars exploring the internal evidence of the epics: the one group (Analysts) tried to prove that the texts lacked the linguistic and stylistic coherence of a singular poetic hand, while the other (Unitarians) urged that despite the uncertain fortunes of transmission the two epics bore the unified artistic focus of a traditional poet identified as "Homer."[1]

The exact identity of the original poet has never really been established, despite the lure of ancient authority such as the longish first *Hymn to Apollo* and monumental investigative efforts by scholars such as T.W. Allen (*Homer: The Origins*) who have cited one island or the other as the native city of the bard. Although it is generally agreed that the successors of this legendary singer (*aoidos*) were wordsmiths (*rhapsodes*) who made a career of performing select episodes of his poems to audiences at festivals and other events across the Greek world, we have little beyond random references (e.g., Plato's *Ion*) for a detailed portrait of the nature and circumstances of their fabled performances.

A critical shift in the philological focus on Homer came with the investigations in the 1920s and 1930s by Harvard's Milman Parry, who proceeded to examine what he saw as the building blocks of Homer's epics: single phrases and whole lines on the one hand, as well as bundles of lines on the other—respectively called *formulas* and *themes*—that were deployed in successive episodes of each epic to convey an essential idea (e.g., a hero's representative quality) or a scene (e.g., the process of arming a great general or entertaining a guest). Parry's labors brought him in contact with some European scholars who reported on living epic performers in places such as Yugoslavia, and it was to this area that Parry turned his attention, accompanied by his research assistant Albert Lord. Parry's investigation of a living epic tradition was cut short by a gunshot accident that claimed his life in the United States in 1935. Happily, Lord was able to carry on for a few more decades with recordings of performances of epics by, and interviews with, Yugoslav bards that Parry had initiated, so that today we have a body of vital publications by the two men on which more recent scholarship in Europe and North America has been built.

This scholarship is the result of collaboration between investigators in two major areas: classical and comparative literatures on the one hand, and linguistics, folklore, and anthropology on the other. Lord continued to fix his gaze on the repetitive structuring of epic poetry and its reliance on the traditional word-hoard from which each singer built his repertoire. However, he encouraged his students and colleagues to go to the field and test these insights on performances by living epic bards across the world, especially in communities where the oral tradition still held ground against the encroaching forces of modernization. Their efforts have been advanced to no small degree by the work of scholars

like Dell Hymes, Richard Bauman, and Dennis Tedlock, whose recordings and analyses of performances in the American field have established ethnopoetics as a valid perspective for the study of oral literature, narrative and otherwise. The philological focus in oral epic study survives, but the benefits of the new emphasis on *performance* are evident in the work of scholars such as Gregory Nagy—one of the preeminent Homerists of our day—and John M. Foley. These scholars have brought to our attention a view of *tradition* as a referential base that encourages rather than hinders the manipulative play of language and the imagination behind it. Although Nagy has been concerned largely with etymological and editorial foundations of Homeric text, a concomitant interest in the stability of this text has led him to probe the relation of performance factors—the Panathenaic Festival, rhapsody, musical accompaniment—to the dynamics of the Homeric epos (*Poetry as Performance*; *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music*). Combining comparative insights from Homeric, Anglo-Saxon, and Yugoslav epics, Foley has benefited especially from the influence of Albert Lord in exploring the place of performance in the manipulation of immanent signs in the epic text (*Immanent Art; Singer of Tales in Performance; Homer's Traditional Art*).

While Lord and the ethnoscientists were developing their ideas, however, a small controversy had created a diversion. Echoing earlier claims by the Chadwicks (*Growth of Literature III*) and Bowra (*Heroic Poetry* 10–11) that Africa had no traditions of the epic, Ruth Finnegan surveys some published narrative texts as well as scholarly arguments to reach the conclusion that on formal grounds alone, "epic seems to be of remarkably little significance in African oral literature" (*Oral Literature in Africa* 108–110). Within a decade of the publication of her book in 1970, there appeared more texts of epic narrative and a few critical rebuttals of her view, not least my full-length study *The Epic in Africa* (1979) and John William Johnson's article, "Yes, Virginia, There is an Epic in Africa" (1980). Besides detailed aesthetic and cultural arguments based on available texts of the epic, my book gives ample attention to the formal grounds on which Finnegan denied there was any epic in Africa—specifically, her dismissal of available texts on the ground that they were, unlike European classics like the Homeric epics, in combined narrative prose and verse song. Although several of the epics I discuss in my book are in narrative and sung/chanted verse, in the chapter titled "On Form and Structure" I demonstrate how African epics—whether presented in verse or in prosimetric form—have been built on the foundation of formulas and themes argued by Parry and Lord.

My arguments in this connection are grounded on insights related to the logic of *themes*, not the least of which were advanced by Lord himself, who hardly reckoned with prosimetric tales (beyond passing mention of Icelandic saga in *The Singer of Tales* 296, n. 8). In proposing that the theme is "in reality protean" (*Singer* 94)—"is not restricted, as is the formula, to metrical considerations;

hence it should not be limited by exact word-for-word repetition" ("Composition by Theme" 73)—he revealed a looseness of structure which encouraged other scholars to explore the basic motifemic foundations of "typical scenes." Thus in the works of scholars like Eliot Youman ("Climactic Themes in the *Iliad*") and Michael Nagler (*Spontaneity and Tradition*), I found considerable support in my examination of the pattern of repetitive structuring of epic narratives that go beyond prosodic considerations. Nagler, in particular, was emphatic that these patterns are "based upon factors that are not always statistically quantifiable" and that "objective metrical criteria, as now known, will not provide an indispensable *differentia*" for determining the relationship of these "type scenes" that echo one another in the Homeric epos (8).

My cardinal contribution in *The Epic in Africa* was to look at epic narratives from the perspective of *performance*. It became clear to me, from a close reading of African epic texts that have been recorded with some measure of concern for contingent factors, that the greatness of these tales depends to a large extent on the dynamics of interaction between the narrators and the environment in which they told their tales, not the least of which was the audience that responded in emotional ways—sometimes with quite vocal interventions—to the efforts of the artist.[2] Here, surely, was a tradition that encouraged a disposition not often favored by the conventions of literary discourse, which was to step outside the text (as narrowly understood) for a proper appreciation of its behavior. It was my comparative discussion of this influence of performance factors on various aspects of the narrative text—from the portrait of the heroic personality to the development of scenes and episodes in the tales—that led me to far reaching recommendations I offered for a cross-cultural study of the genre of the epic:

> Structurally, for instance, a bard under the pressure of the audience out there endeavors to encompass more than rigid metric form can allow, and so some of the fashionable conclusions which have been framed largely on prosodic considerations need a little reexamining. And stylistically, since it is clear that the bard endeavors to impress that audience with the peculiar appeal of his style, however long-established the tradition which he re-enacts, we must go back and look a little deeper into the affective purposes of certain tendencies in the acknowledged classics like Homer whom we have for so long seen in terms not of the pre-literate artistic background from which they derive but of the sophisticated literary culture. (242–243)

A good deal of the work done in the field of epic or heroic narratives in the 1980s and 1990s was in fundamental ways guided by this concern for the text influenced either by the Parry-Lord school or by the ethnopoetic interest in performance, sometimes from a combination of both perspectives. Besides the classical scholarship of Gregory Nagy, Richard Janko, Mark Edwards, and

others, there is the equally valuable work on Indian epic traditions by John Smith and Stuart Blackburn as well as investigations of African heroic traditions by Jeff Opland, Suzanne Slyomovics, Christiane Seydou, John William Johnson, and more. The field of performance studies has gained immensely from the work of Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Richard Bauman, Charles Briggs, and others in North American communities, especially in the depth of interest taken in the life and art of the oral narrator, an area in which Albert Lord himself showed early leadership in his portrait of the South Slavic *guslar* Avdo Mededovic. There also has been much focus on aspects of the history, culture, and society—politics, religion, gender, economy, etc.—reflected by the epic texts, as well as on the overarching influence of *tradition* on the art of the narrator. This last area of interest has enjoyed the concentrated gaze of John Miles Foley and other scholars.

II

Since my work on the African epic, I have pursued a research trajectory in African mythmaking that is defined by a combined interest in the artistic dimensions of storytelling and its broader social and cultural implications (chiefly *Myth in Africa* and *Once Upon a Kingdom*). As the social and political climate in Africa has continued to deteriorate, it has become increasingly clear to me that I can no longer indulge the luxury of solely aestheticist investigations of the traditions of the continent. Like many of my professional colleagues, I opted to go on exile from my country because the climate for honest intellectual pursuits no longer existed, nor did the commitment that drove my exertions yield any more dividends in terms either of material comfort for my family or of a sense of professional fulfillment for me. Living in exile has afforded me the opportunity. to observe the political scene in Africa more closely than I did in the past, and to achieve a clearer understanding of the responsibility of the African intellectual in our time. It has become clear to me that the history of Africa—and this is especially true of my country, Nigeria—has been marked in fundamental ways by severe intergroup rivalries that have left little room for anything like the unified political will a nation needs for a meaningful development of its latent talents and resources.

Therefore, while I continue to be interested in the artistic achievement of the oral traditions of Africa, my investigations are nowadays more readily geared toward seeing them as a *living* heritage, with special emphasis on their validity as guides to our present life than simply as creative masterpieces: "Not *Ars gratia artis* ('Art for the sake of art') but *Ars gratia vivendi* ('Art for the sake of living')" as John Miles Foley has more recently reminded us (*How to Read an Oral Poem* 189). In my more recent work on these traditions, I have taken a

focused look at oral texts and discovered certain continuities between contemporary political behavior and the kinds of propensities revealed by the traditional texts. In much of the heroic and historic traditions that we have formed the habit of cherishing as evidence of a glorious cultural past—or "bywords in the struggle to illustrate the achievements of the African past," as Walter Rodney has put it (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* 56)—I have found homologies of conduct between the fabled heroes and indigenous leaders who have been in charge of their societies since independence from European rule. Take, for instance, the figure of the great Sunjata among the Mandinka, a warrior king heralded by impressive epithets. When he and his mother and siblings were in exile in the kingdom of Mansa Tounkara of Mema, Sunjata is said to have given such a good account of himself as a hunter and warrior that Tounkara, on little consultation with his people and largely by his personal fiat, first appoints him viceroy of the kingdom then decrees that he should succeed as king should he decide to remain in Mema rather than return later to his home.[3] Do we wonder where President Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, only a few years ago, found the precedent in naming his own son to succeed him as president of the country?

Even more significantly, these heroic tales about a warlike past may reveal not so much a people's pride in the achievements of their heroes of old as anxieties about their fate in present-day power configurations. A heroic narrative that I collected from my part of Nigeria in the 1980s provides an apt illustration. Briefly, an extraordinary man of the village of Ibusa is father to twin boys who grow up prodigiously. As he advances in age, he is made the victim of an order that a tooth be pulled from his mouth every year and offered as tribute to the king of ancient Benin. When the twin boys find out what is going on, they position themselves in defense of their father, in the end destroying the entire imperial army of Benin and installing their father as ruler of the kingdom (*Once Upon a Kingdom* 37–60). On the surface of it, this story manifests itself as a standard account of resistance in which a subject community prevails against the almighty power of imperial Benin. However, a thick analysis of the tale—taking into account the social history of this village and power relations between Benin and communities in the region—convinced me that the narrative was rooted more in local hegemonic struggles, against the backdrop of present-day Nigerian political engineering, than in nationalistic aspirations of the past. In other words, the history of this village's struggles against Benin only offered a context for reifying the marginalization of some segments of the narrator's society and his hopes for the achievement of harmonious relations in the entire community.

Another story I collected from a different community (Ubulu-Uno) in the same region, and which is part of the same stock or cycle of tales about ancient Benin, led me to a somewhat analogous conclusion. When the kingdom finds its kings dying one after another soon after coronation, it issues an invitation to herbal doctors across the empire to try their skills and arrest the situation; any doctor who

fails the test is instantly executed. When a doctor from the village of Ubulu-Uno succeeds, he is rewarded by the king with a princess as his wife as well as an attendant to serve their needs. On his way back to his village, the doctor is stopped by the leader of the imperial army of the kingdom and sent home empty-handed; on getting home, however, the doctor summons his powers to cast a spell that whisks the princess and attendant straight to his side, forcing an affronted Benin to declare war on the village. In the ensuing campaigns, waged as much by metaphysical as by physical resources, the doctor leads a small but mystically fortified band of seven hunters in destroying the entire imperial army of Benin and forcing the subjugated king to accept a redrawing of territorial boundaries between Benin and the entire ethnic family to which Ubulu-Uno belongs! Again, a postnarrative discussion in which I joined revealed that the story, far from being merely an account of a war between a small village and a great kingdom that claims imperial control over it, embraces the much larger purview of power relations in contemporary Nigerian ethnic politics (*African Oral Literature* 192–201).

In these and other heroic tales I have collected from the field, I have been able to reach such interpretations on the strength of two insights I believe should be invaluable to scholars of the oral narrative arts. First, we need to put a greater premium on the present in which the performance of a tale is located than on the past that it purports to recreate. It is true that narrators often try to validate their craft by invoking the past as its source of inspiration or to justify the extraordinary scenarios they conjure by lamenting that men of today are no longer capable of the heights of excellence their ancestors easily claimed.[4] But they themselves never lived in those times; they are very much men of our own day, subject to the quotidian circumstances that define our lives. Whatever their level of skill in framing heroic society, they ultimately filter that society through a psychology defined by the conditions in which we live. In other words, the tales they tell are in a fundamental sense more about our present life, however skillfully masked by images of another world. It is not for nothing, for instance, that the griot Bamba Suso, who devotes enormous space to celebrating Sunjata as the ultimate authority over life and death in the world he rules, concludes his string of praises of the hero by reminding him, "The world does not belong to any man!" (Innes, *Sunjata* 53, line 309). It is precisely because the narrator's mind is in the final analysis rooted in the world he knows that—if Foley is right in seeing the oral epic as *ars gratia vivendi* rather than as *ars gratia artis*—we are justified in exploring the impress, on our contemporary life, of the figures the narrator traces in his tale.

To do this, we have to take quite seriously the counsels advanced by two groups of scholars. On the one hand, Fredric Jameson's view of art as a "socially symbolic act" (*The Political Unconscious*) makes so much sense in the nervous conditions of life and art especially in conflict-ridden societies of the Third World, that I would go so far as to press his interpretive mantra—"always historicize"—one step further by urging that we *always contemporize* the oral

tradition if we honestly take it seriously as a living heritage. For if we merely historicize, we may be doing no more than to read the "voices from the past," as Foley calls traditional texts, only against the periods in which they are putatively set. On the contrary, contemporizing would enable us to project the world configured by the texts, however far back in time it goes, into our own world in an unavoidable but fruitful dialectical engagement with our present circumstances. This is what I have tried to do in my analysis of the tales I cited above from my field collections. Because I think the tales have been told from a mindset formed or influenced by current socio-political conditions, their images have survived not so much because they evoke a vague notion of "tradition" as because they find their symbolic fit in the climate of affairs in which their tellers live. Over and above the legitimate thematics of class warfare that subtends their interpretive program, therefore, I believe that Jameson and his mentors (Marx, Althusser, Lucacs, etc.) provide a perspective that offers us a more secure basis for interrogating the relevance of epic and other narratives for our lives than the slippery concept of tradition. The challenge lies in looking forward, not backwards; "tradition," as Ruth Finnegan has usefully observed, "is intimately bound up with the normal social and political processes of any society" which continue to be subject to a variety of forces and interests within it ("Tradition" 114).

A second and complementary resource is offered by the ethnography of speaking and ethnopoetics schools, represented on the one hand especially by Dell Hymes and Richard Bauman and on the other by Dennis Tedlock. Whatever the divergences between them, they are united in stressing the importance of the *performance event* as the site of an interplay of various factors (the narrator, the audience, physical location, etc.) through which the real dynamic of the tales may be most fruitfully grasped. Hymes and Tedlock have led the way in providing guides for the transcription of narrative texts that project as faithfully as possible the relevance of the narrators' vocal levels, the periodic pauses in their narration, gestural and other bodily cues accompanying the vocal effort, occasional interventions by the attending audience, and other physical contingencies that frame the narrative event and provide the basis for a transcription that represents the peculiar nature of the oral text. Tedlock, indeed, encourages something approaching an operatic score of the narrative text. If Bakhtin is correct in stating that all language "lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (293), Tedlock has succeeded brilliantly in investing the narrative performance with its full dialogic potential.[5]

In transcriptions of heroic narratives I have collected, I have followed Tedlock's system as much as possible, including an indication of physical contingencies whether in the body of the narrative transcript or in explanatory notices. I especially recall an event that happened during my recording of the tale from Ibusa (cited above) of a hunter whose twin sons annihilated an entire army of imperial Benin and crowned their father king. As I observed in an earlier discussion

of the tale (*Once Upon a Kingdom* 38–39), the narrator Ojiudu's performance had been complicated by the ambient noise of music played by a group of young men in a nearby room, forcing Ojiudu to do two things: one, increase the volume of his own instrumental accompaniment, and two, yoke this tale of war to a more serio-comic one he had previously told me independently—of the hunter's endless search for a wife who could satisfy the harsh demands of life with him. If "tradition" may be so easily influenced by the contingencies of its performance, does it not make sense to give as much attention to the changing contexts as to the stable ingredients of its "text"?

No transcript of an African oral epic speaks better for Tedlock's system than *The Ozidi Saga*, a story from the Ijo of the delta country in Nigeria recorded and translated by the renowned poet-playwright John Pepper Clark[-Bekederemo]. The story was originally performed more in dramatic than in narrative sequences as part of an annual festival, held over a period of seven days, in its delta homeland (Orua). Clark recorded his version from an itinerant storyteller (Okabou) in the university town of Ibadan, about 300 miles away in a different ethnic (Yoruba) region. Although the traditional seven-day program was maintained in its narration, Clark's version evidently responded more to the ludic environment of an open performance than to the more restrained arena of ritual drama. The story remains the same: a child (Ozidi) is born after his warrior father (Ozidi Sr.) has been killed by fellow-generals who are opposed to the kingship of their clan passing on to his family; the child grows prodigiously, destroys his father's assassins one after another, then goes on to combat and kill all other extraordinary figures in the clan that stake their own claims to power. Okabou's performance was recorded in 1963, in the midst of a political crisis in this part of the country which ultimately brought Nigeria to a civil war (1967–1970).

It took Clark a good deal of time to have his bulky material (of parallel Ijo text and English translation) published jointly by the university presses of Oxford and Ibadan in 1977, thanks to production costs and other technical problems. Nothing in both his Introductory Essay and notes to the successive nights of the performance suggests that Clark, who knew next to nothing about the discipline of folklore, was at all familiar with Tedlock's ethnopoetic system when he set down the recorded tale to printed text, though in 1966 he had published a play adapted from the tale (*Ozidi: A Play*). His edition of the 1963 recording was largely guided by his instincts as a playwright nurtured, to be sure, by his familiarity with the forms of traditional drama and the postindependence interest by African artists in recuperating cultural traditions sidelined by colonial prejudice. As a result he was able to offer us, in his edition of the Ozidi story, an operatic transcription that went a long way in addressing the contextual factors that were to form a corner-stone of Tedlock's system. As he tells us in his Preface to the text,

> *The Ozidi Saga*, like most works of *literature* in Africa, is more than a verbal composition. It is in reality a composite art, a multi-faceted piece whose other integral parts are the visual, representing the dramatic character of the work; the ritual representing its religious significance; and finally, which brings us back to the auditory side of the story, the music, vocal as well as instrumental, impregnating the work from the beginning to the end. [. . .] The nearest European form to this is perhaps the opera—especially the Wagnerian type. (xxix)

Besides the prosimetric structure of the text—snatches of chant and song punctuating the narrative—there are numerous instances of intervention from the audience, ranging from questions and comments to the narrator and his responses thereto, to random observations not specifically addressed to anyone's attention, as well as occasional call-and-response sequences serving a variety of purposes: saluting the narrator's virtuosity, celebrating his recreation of a cherished heritage, calling order to the rowdiness of some spectators, and other exertions that underline the warm, fervid event of this performance.

The value of this operatic scoring of the narrative text is to locate it more squarely in the present than in anything that may be vaguely suggested by the concept of tradition, drawing more attention to the immediate ambient culture of the narrative images than to their assumed historical sources. Take one of the numerous disputes between the narrator and some members of his audience over the setting of the tale. He frequently situates the events in the fabled kingdom of Benin, but some Ijo members of the audience remind him that Orua is the real home of the tale. Why do they oppose the narrator's choice? The immediate reason may be they are unwilling to award the credit for this cultural landmark to Benin, despite the appeal of the kingdom in the folk imagination of this region—"the empire," as Clark says in his Introductory Essay, "of improbable happenings that together with the world of spirits help to explain the events of their own lives" (xxxvii). A more compelling reason for the preference of Orua over Benin may be found, however, in the nationalist resistance to the political dominance of Benin not only in the past—as I have argued elsewhere (*Once Upon a Kingdom* 4–26)—but even in the politics of the moment of recording the tale. An alliance between the dominant northern party in the country and one of the southern parties had resulted in the creation of a new region (Midwest, 1963) out of the Western Region. Although for historical reasons Benin had been chosen as the capital of the new region, many Midwesterners still had residual antipathies toward Benin and accepted the position awarded it only as a fair compromise with their long fight for a new region. Without the audience's contests with the narrator over Benin as the setting of the Ozidi story, and Clark's faithful recording thereof, we would have been denied this interpretive insight into the role of contingent factors in the narration of the tale.

The political troubles in western Nigeria at the time of performance of the Ozidi tale were to influence several contextual details in it, and I'll mention just

one significant image from that moment in political history. In Ozidi's contest with Azezabife, one of his father's assassins, recorded on the second night of performance, the latter is so distraught by the spell cast upon him by the witch Oreame (Ozidi's grandmother) that the hero now moves in to terminate his life. Suddenly, one of Azeza's magic gourds falls down. "As it fell, and he squashed it like this underfoot, oh, power showed again in Azeza" (*Saga* 94). There is "Laughter" from the audience at this point because, as the editor tells us in an endnote, the narrator—who often gets into trouble with nationalistic Ijo elements in the crowd—has used the English loan-word *pawa* (for "power"). Much later, on the seventh night of his narration, the narrator presents a scene in which Ozidi's grandmother Oreame buries all her charms in her body so as to appear as a young girl and lure an opponent to a fight with Ozidi. At this point, it is a spectator who exclaims the word "Power!" albeit in Ijo (*Kro me!*), and once again there is "Laughter" from the audience. This time, the editor says in an endnote, "With echoes of recent and live political slogans," (*Saga* 390, n. 16). Clark is referring here to slogans and images of "power" bandied around at the time by a politician like Chief Remi Fani-Kayode—popularly called "Fani Power!"—who brought tremendous confrontationalism to the politics of the day by giving little quarter to views advanced by his opponents.[6]

We can see the value of Clark's transcriptions of these performative touches. The spectators are energized by these images of power and confrontation because, even when they occur in other tales they are familiar with, they make far greater sense in the context of the tumultuous politics of the times. We may safely assume that the narrator has a deep investment in the traditional sources from which he draws in performing his tales.[7] The same can hardly be said for spectators who have equally compelling quotidian interests and investments that they bring with them to their participation in these narrative events. In many ways, the performance provides them an opportunity to relieve anxieties they endure on a daily basis and to achieve what Jameson calls a "utopian gratification" (288) from the existential battles they are constantly forced to wage. Clark's ethnopoetic scoring of *The Ozidi Saga* remains, for me, the best illustration of an oral epic narrative in whose dialogical texture the voices of tradition attain full relevance in our present lives.[8]

III

In saying this, I want to acknowledge the tremendous energy and brilliance that a scholar like John Miles Foley has shown in his study of the oral *tradition*. He effectively began his stellar career by clarifying the Oral Formulaic Theory propounded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in their studies of the Homeric, Yugoslav, and medieval European traditions of the heroic epic; his *Theory of Oral Composition* (1988) represents his mature grasp of the principles of the

Parry-Lord proposition at this point. This proposition hinges on an understanding of the repetitive units of epic narrative composition as serving either to maintain the prosodic regularity of the Homeric hexameter, as in the case of the short descriptive epithet or narrative clause (*formula*), or else to provide a standard format for describing a variety of events that are roughly similar in character, as in the case of the type-scene (*theme*); the value of these units is essentially functional, not semantic. This proposition was contested by scholars (George Calhoun, William Whallon, etc.) who argued a greater semantic relevance for the units (especially the formula) than Parry in particular was inclined to allow. In *Immanent Art* (1991), Foley takes the further step of affirming the validity of formulas and themes within the semantic system of a culture's poetic tradition; though an epithet used in describing a person or object may seem merely tagged on or cosmetic, it is really meant to conjure a much larger, *metonymic* relationship to the character's total personality or to a broader mythology (as a part to a whole) that the tradition has conferred on that person or object over time.

The arguments in *Immanent Art* rely to a considerable degree on the receptionalist work of especially Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, in exploring the ways in which meaning is realized in the relationship between artist and audience. In his later works, notably *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995) and *Homer's Traditional Art* (1999), Foley is to avail himself of the growing influence of approaches in ethnolinguistics and ethnopoetics in establishing how such meaning is realized in the interface between the nonce event of a poetic performance and the immanence of the tradition it invokes. Here he has found enough evidence, in the three epic traditions he has been investigating, for achieving a resolution of perspectives that helps him in formulating a mantra he has not hesitated to drill with a certain pedagogic regularity, especially in his more recent book *How to Read an Oral Poem*: the investigation of oral traditional texts is best served by an understanding that "performance is the enabling event, tradition the enabling referent" (130, 150, 184; cf. *Homer's Traditional Art* 6).

It is easy to see a slight shift of focus in Foley's work from *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, and to find that his apprenticeship in the Parry-Lord workshop has come at some cost. The two Harvard scholars were working with ancient texts that came to us through an editorial pedigree rather less respectful of the integrity of oral culture than committed to setting the terms of its participation in the emerging culture of literacy. Parry was perceptive enough to realize that what he was looking at came from the oral culture, but he needed more time than fate had allowed him to free himself fully from the scientistic mindset of classical philology and confront the ways of orality squarely on its own terms. He was still measuring oral *tradition* on a statistical log that offered up the number of times specific phrases occurred. Lord followed dutifully in his footsteps and had recorded only modest gains by the time he himself passed away. Foley himself was still counting phrases up to *Immanent Art*, but from *The Singer of Tales in*

Performance on, as I indicated above, had begun a more decided shift from that statistical paradigm toward a more context-based view, thanks to his growing attachment to the approaches championed by Hymes, Tedlock, and others.[9]

Yet he has still found it hard to withdraw fully from the Parry-Lord idiom of discourse: the word *tradition* continues to resound with an almost deafening din in his scholarship. It is perhaps unfair to expect differently from one committed to the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition he directs in his university, but we can see certain risks in this commitment in his receptionalist recommendations. In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, he cites a passage from the Slavic *guslar* Avdo Mededovic's epic song "The Wedding of Smailagic Meho," and tells us,

> Via this extended byte of figurative language he was doing much more than simply marking time or decorating his narrative. He was prescribing how to read his epic story, how to decode his song, by reinforcing its character and most basic identity as a performance networked in a poetic tradition. He was implying at least as much as he was saying, telling his audience not just what happened but how they should interpret what happened. He was saying "hear this against the background of our epic tradition." (87)

I see two basic problems with this proposition. The first is the rather conservative view of "tradition" it projects and the tendency to assume an easy equivalence between the sensibilities of narrator and audience. Even if we should accept, for argument's sake, that in his "performance arena" Avdo Mededovic customarily performed his songs to mostly Muslim audiences, how uniform was their understanding of the tradition they shared or their grasp of the figurative language in which he sang? Formulaic diction is basically a resource of composition and performance, sometimes used against a musical backdrop and sometimes not. The audience does not usually think in those terms, except for those among them who are themselves poets or performers. When audiences listen, they are listening for the impact of the text on them; part of this is of course aesthetic, but an even greater part relates to the conditions in which they live. What, then, is the meaning of an "appeal to tradition" (91) to citizens of a society steadily wracked by interethnic discord, as the Slavic society even of Avdo's day was? We do not know who the precise audience was that he sang his song for; but we should allow that some of them were more inclined to *contemporize* the sociopolitical facts of the song than to ponder its aesthetic success. In other words, in the present condition of their lives they are more likely to be "reading for the social"—to borrow a thought from Quayson—in terms of seeing the signs embedded in Avdo's song as cues for engaging the personal and collective challenges of existence.[10]

The "performance arena" itself is my second worry with these *traditional* texts, and brings me to lament their overall provenance. Unlike the denatured Homer handed down to us by his ancient editors, the singers (*aoidoi*) we find in the *Odyssey* (Phemios and Demodokos) work in an environment of relaxation

and merrymaking that frequently punctuates the rhythm of their performances. In the case of Demodokos at the Phaiakian court of King Alkinous, Odysseus specifically requests that the singer offer an alternative song to the one that brought the traveler grief; at Odysseus' own court in Ithaka, Phemios enjoys nothing like a civilized audience from the rowdy suitors who obviously have their eyes and ears on a contested prize. Whatever their limitations, such may be considered the natural "performance arena" of these songs, which means that they could never have yielded the sort of flawless hexametric structure we find in Homer. It also means that if the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or parts thereof, were ever offered in those natural situations, they have evidently been freed of the inevitable interventions—audiential and otherwise—of their natural performance arena, the better to order them as program scripts for festivals, as Wade-Gery (*Poet* 14–18) and Nagy (*Best of* 6–7; *Pindar's Homer* 21–24, 60–73; *Questions* 42–43, 81–82) have suggested. Under such circumstances, how far, really, can we press Foley's concept of *traditional* referentiality?

Just as unfortunately, the texts we have so far of South Slavic epic can hardly be said to have been recorded in a natural performance arena. Avdo Mededovic and his kind finally relocated from the courts of Muslim grandees to public coffeehouses (Foley, *How to Read* 209), where they played for men of not much higher status than themselves; yet when he had to be recorded, he was removed from that natural arena to a studio where he was denied the merry distractions of his ambience. In a note to a version of "Udovica Jana" recorded in Orasac in 1974, Foley tells us that "at an oral performance in Trsic which [Foley and Barbara Kerewsky-Halpern] attended, the audience often added and inserted lines which they judged appropriate to the situation" (12, n. 5); so why are we told only that the small audience that attended the performance under study "listened closely, the older people often punctuating the singer's emphases with sighs and nods" (12)? Was this polite silence demanded of them, the better to ensure the singer's achievement of flawless decasyllables?[11] In his recent edition of one of the Parry-Lord library of Serbo-Croatian texts, Halil Bajgoric's *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Becirbey,* Foley was working with a text recorded under the usual non-natural setting arranged by the American scholars and transcribed back at Harvard by their Slavic field assistant, Nikola Vujnovic. Foley has provided a useful commentary drawing attention to the performative particles sung at the beginnings of various lines and Nikola's frequently unwarranted tampering with what the singer Bajgoric originally sang. Alas, there is little evidence of contextual interventions in a text that is almost flawlessly decasyllabic; often, indeed, Foley takes care to explain the occasional deviations from the norm. Also, although there is a biographical sketch of the narrator, Foley's brilliant commentary says virtually nothing of the intersection between the man, his troubled world, and the text of his song, though it attends amply to matters philological, in good old scholastic fashion.

In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, Foley comes to commendable terms with insights advanced by the ethnolinguistics and ethnopoetics schools of oral literary scholarship, which have ultimately helped him in realizing the limitations of the Parry-Lord approach to epic texts. Discussing one of the Zuni tales recorded by Tedlock, Foley has rather tastefully revised well-known mantras such as Lord's "The tale's the thing" (*Singer* 68) and D.K. Wilgus's "The text is the thing" so as to foreground the primacy of performance—"*The play's the thing (and not the script)*" (*How to Read* 152)—no doubt for its value as the true source of the tale's signification and word-power. Whether we call it buyer's remorse or belated revelation, there is something sobering in the following statement towards the end of the book:

> Let's be as explicit as possible, Parry and Lord derived the supposed universals for "oral poetry" directly from their fieldwork collection and its overlap with the Homeric epics that have reached us only in manuscript. All verbal art from oral tradition was in effect balanced on the head of a pin. Even if we now know that OralPoetry is *a very plural form* and that no single set of definitions can do anything but muddy the waters, we need to know where this initial—and enormously influential—approximation came from. (208–209)[12]

What this tells me, I am afraid, is that we must review our attachment to a concept of transcendent meanings, here encouraged by Foley's ideas of traditional referentiality and immanence, and pay greater attention to insights offered by individual performances across a wider cross-cultural universe. In this article, as in my previous publications, I have argued that performance properly recorded gives us an ample opportunity to observe the intersection of oral narratives with the dramas and traumas of our continuing histories, not to see them as fossilized records of an old outlook. I also identify myself with the sentiments of Ruth Finnegan who, in her Milman Parry Lecture at John Miles Foley's Center for Studies in Oral Tradition in 1990, laments that "there seems to be somewhat less interest among oral-formulaic scholars than others in the arguably more political and divisive facets of tradition" (117) and indeed urges that "the term 'tradition' and 'traditional' in scholarly accounts almost always needs deconstructing through such questions as: 'traditional' in what sense? [. . .] *who* created it in whole or in part [. . .] and with what assumptions or for what purpose?" ("Tradition" 113).[13]

IV

In concluding my discussion of the topic of performance in *The Epic in Africa*, I express the following sentiment: "As a comparatist, I can only hope that my

ideas will invite certain scholars to open their eyes to evidence from areas that they have hitherto thought of no cultural account" (243). It is reassuring to find in Foley an analogous faith, that "the comparative perspective solves any number of problems that have nagged literary scholars for centuries" (*How to Read* 168).

I would like to validate this faith with an episode in *Iliad* 24 to which Foley gives detailed attention in his *Immanent Art*. This is the peace meeting between Priam and Achilles, and here the difference between Foley's focus and mine will be clear. Although he makes a few casual remarks about the audience's place in Homer's execution of this moving moment — "A Homeric audience steeped in metonymic referentiality" (142), "the audience's extrasituational 'map' for interpretation of this unique event" (182), and a few others — Foley is really much less interested in the dialogue of sensibilities between performer and audience than in the thematic patterns the episode reveals to the scholastic mind. His main task here, as he puts it, is "the recovery of traditional referentiality" and "the reinvestiture of traditional structures with their inherent meaning" (137–138). Hymes and Tedlock get only passing mention in *Immanent Art*, and I suspect that if *The Singer of Tales in Performance* had been written earlier than *Immanent Art*, the latter might well have been a much different book. On the contrary, I prefer to train my lights on the narrator-audience dialectic as the first and enabling basis for reading the significance of any moment in the tale.

Foley devotes most of chapter 5 of *Immanent Art* to discussing the processes by which Achilles, who violated the bonds of community by withdrawing his contribution to the Greek army early in the *Iliad*, is steadily propelled by certain *traditional* structural (e.g., the "pattern of (Im)mortal Imperatives") as well as cultural (e.g., the "Feasting theme") forces to return to "the normal rhythms of human community." In *The Epic in Africa* I offer an extensive comparative portrait of the heroic personality as evidenced by African (e.g., *The Ozidi Saga*) and non-African epics (e.g., the *Iliad*), and I must say that Foley's reading of Achilles's behavior generally agrees with mine. I would, however, like to isolate that scene where Achilles offers Priam an invitation to supper and see if it yields any insights, from a performance-oriented perspective, which might throw further light on Achilles's behavior at this point.

After several uneasy moments in Priam's god-guided visit to Achilles's tent and preparations for Priam's ransom of Hector's body, Achilles invites the king to join him at table. I quote the relevant passage in Lattimore's dependable translation:

> Your son is given back to you, aged sir, as you asked it.
> He lies on a bier. When dawn shows you yourself shall see him 600
> as you take him away. Now you and I must remember our supper.
> For even Niobe, she of the lovely tresses, remembered
> To eat, whose twelve children were destroyed in her palace,
> **Six daughters, and six sons in the pride of their youth, whom Apollo**

killed with arrows from his silver bow, being angered
with Niobe, and shaft-showering Artemis killed the daughters;
because Niobe likened herself to Leto of the fair colouring
and said Leto had borne only two, she herself had borne many;
but the two, though they were only two, destroyed all those others.
Nine days long they lay in their blood, nor was there anyone
to bury them, for the son of Kronos made stones out of
the people; but on the tenth day the Uranian gods buried them.
But she remembered to eat when she was worn out with weeping.
And now somewhere among the rocks, in the lonely mountains,
in Sipylos, where they say is the resting place of the goddesses
who are nymphs, and dance beside the waters of Acheloios,
there, stone still, she broods on the sorrows that the gods gave her.
Come then, we also, aged magnificent sir, must remember
to eat, and afterwards you may take your beloved son back
to Ilion, and mourn for him; and he will be much lamented.

This speech has received some amount of attention from various scholars. Two great Alexandrian critics, Aristophenes and Aristarchus, expunged lines 614–617 on the ground that it was out of place for Achilles to invite Priam to eat just as Niobe did in her grief, only to be turned into stone by the gods (Leaf, *Companion* 400). Richardson's brilliant *Commentary* (339–342) correctly identifies the ring structure of this passage, but says little further of any substance. Willcock points out that it "contains, in the story of Niobe, the most striking example in the *Iliad* of the peculiarly Homeric use of the mythical example, or paradeigma. This is a tale inserted in a speech for the purpose of persuasion or consolation" (*The Iliad of Homer* 318).[14]

None of these scholars says anything about the oral performance dimensions of the speech, nor do they explain why Achilles would address Priam in such elaborate detail. Of more recent views on the passage from a somewhat receptionalist perspective, Ruth Scodel considers to what extent the speech impresses its audience as evidence of mythical invention in Achilles's use of the paradigm. "The auditor," she says, "is not supposed to admire the poet's cleverness or consider Achilles as an inventor, noticing the fictional qualities of his rhetoric. The competent listener instead concentrates on the similarities and differences between Niobe and Priam, considering how well the paradigm works" (*Listening* 25). Oivind Andersen considers instead the role of the paradigm within the spatial economy of the overall story of the *Iliad* and sees in its use an instance of "a considerable and seemingly irrelevant extension." In the particular case of Achilles' speech to Priam, "there is," he says, "more here than is needed to make the point" why the grieving king should eat just as Niobe did in her own case (5).

Yet is the elaboration in character or in place? For one thing, though Achilles has prepared Hector's body for recovery by his father and now invites the latter to break bread with him, he has merely followed due cultural form; his anger at

the divine agency in Priam's visit (*Iliad* 24.559–571) has hardly abated. For another thing, why would a young Achilles tell Priam a story the much older man may know better than he does? So the crucial question to ask, from a performance point of view is: In this elaboration on Niobe's experience, who really is talking to whom or—in the language of Irene de Jong ("Homer and Narratology," "Homer"), Scott Richardson (*The Homeric Narrator* 174–175), etc.—who is the real "narrator" and who the "narratee," "primary" or otherwise?

I say this as a way of drawing our attention once again to the damage that has been done over the ages to our understanding of the *oral* art of Homer by the editors who handed down the texts to us in the first place. Clearly, the poems as we have them now could never have been a record of original or natural performances, which would have given some indication of the sort of audience "Homer" had before him as he told his story—something the Blind Chian at least does in the Hymn to Apollo. It is possible that in his elaborative paradigms, Homer is simply showing off his extensive knowledge of his people's mythology or indulging what Walter Leaf has called the "epic love of detail" (*Iliad* 255). But if Ruth Scodel is right in suggesting that Homer had a "social audience" that transcended class boundaries—which would mean that "Athenian democrats could listen to it as enthusiastically as Ionian aristocrats had" (*Listening* 173–212)—then some of his paradigms gave him an opportunity to expatiate his mythological references (like the Niobe experience) to those in his audience who were disabled either by ideological investment or level of educational exposure to appreciate some of the cultural heritage available to others in the society. In short, in those lines of Achilles's speech that I have emphasized, it is Homer speaking to his audience, not Achilles speaking to Priam: Homer as the "primary narrator" is digressing to educate his audience—the "primary narratee" of his performance, as Ruth Scodel and Scott Richardson would say.[15]

Why? Because although Achilles is moved by cultural or "immortal imperative" (Foley, *Immanent Art* 159) to sit at table with Priam, the garrulity accorded him is a little atypical. Besides being too young to teach old Priam cultural wisdom, he is arguably still unhappy with divinity for imposing itself on his business with the Trojans; his anger has only been held in temporary abeyance before the war will resume in unrelenting fury. The total destruction that looms over Troy is underlined by Achilles's regulation of time allowed the people to mourn their fallen hero. Otherwise, he can hardly afford to waste words in the mythological education of an older man. If Nagy is right in his etymological analysis of Achilles's name—"the figure of Achilles is pervasively associated with the theme of grief" (*Best of* 77)—there are obviously other thoughts on the warrior's mind. The elaboration of Niobe's fate is simply an effort by the Homeric narrator to educate his audience; it is not addressed by Achilles to Priam. The concept of "mythical paradeigma" would need to be reviewed so

literate culture and literary scholarship could come to terms with the peculiar nature of oral narrative performance.

The point of all this is to avoid making too much of the civility accorded Achilles in this admittedly moving episode. With all due respect for Foley's brilliant discussion of the immanent implications of *Iliad* 24, I suggest that we need to address the challenge of *re*-cognizing the original, *oral performative* basis of the epic. If we can appreciate that the narrator is responsible primarily to the audience before him, then we are better placed to realize that in his performance he is committed more to their present circumstances than to an immanent order of things. In his performance he is using tools of language he has acquired through training and long practice, but his audience cannot be expected to approach his tales the same way he does; besides, in a world of constant cultural change and increasing instability to life, they hardly have the luxury to see things the way they might have in the past. A concept of tradition as a fossilized frame of cultural reference needs to be seriously reconsidered if we accept that time forces changes upon social and other forms of reality. In the performance even of traditional tales, the present commands greater urgency than the past in the lives of the audience.[16] Our interpretation should accept this as a first premise.

V

None of the above arguments is, of course, intended to suggest that we abandon conventional literary or aestheticist approaches to oral epic texts. On the contrary, these texts appeal to many of us—whether insiders or outsiders to the host culture, and whether we come to the texts in their indigenous tongues or in translation—because they contain, on the surface at least, something we have learnt to identify as a beautiful representation of events. We shall also continue to recognize the virtuosity of the people who perform the stories. In the final analysis, however, we have a greater responsibility to explore the relevance of the stories to our lives in an increasingly difficult world than whatever they may have meant to the historical moments the stories recreate, especially for those stories set in a distant past. In this article, I have urged that we begin by recording stories in their more natural contexts of performance, because only when we can appreciate the dialogue of sensibilities between the narrator and the original audience are we better able to bridge the "gap of indeterminacy" between them—to borrow Iser's receptionalist wisdom (*The Art of Reading* 23–27)—and read the lessons of the tales for our times. For those stories that have come to us shorn of such contextual aids, we might indeed be better placed to read their meanings if we tried to glean some of the original context behind their text.

More seriously, we gain little by continuing in our accustomed celebration of the epic as a glorious artistic heritage. Far too many people today are smarting under the lash of ideologies it sometimes encourages. Let us return once more to

the behavior of Achilles in the *Iliad.* It is becoming increasingly difficult to defend the hard militarism—some might even say, the gore-blinded belligerence—he demonstrates after he loses his best friend Patroclus. Take that elaborate episode where the young Lycaon desperately begs Achilles to spare his life for a goodly ransom, and Achilles not only rebuffs him—"in words of vaunting derision," to borrow Lattimore's apt translation—but proceeds to bury his sword into the neck of the disarmed and defenseless prisoner (*Il.* 21.34–135). Now, do we seriously believe that, even with peace made between him and Priam and his friend Patroclus laid to rest, Achilles's ferocious narcissism and blood lust will have cooled when the war resumes after a nine-day truce? More important, let us look at the matter from the perspectives of performance and receptionalism. If the reaction of the (arguably) female spectator of *The Ozidi Saga* to the gory thrusts exchanged by Ozidi and Odogu in the presence of their (grand)mothers (see note 8) is anything to go by, how would women in Homer's audience react in their gynaecological gut to Achilles's cold-blooded butchery of his younger enemy? Even today, how could any of us expect mature female readers to celebrate the "heroism" of such a warrior? Is it any wonder, then, that Greek poets of our own day have, in light of their nation's civil war, risen in defense of hapless Lycaon against an icon too long celebrated in their traditions (Ricks 233–236)?

Equally valid issues could be raised against African "heroes" such as Sunjata and Ozidi. After his conquest of his arch-enemy Sumanguru (Soumaoro) and establishment of due institutions over territories under his imperial control (Niane 73–78), Sunjata seems to have become restless for further action and gone on a series of reckless campaigns. In the account of one griot (Banna Kanute), Sunjata's subjects rebelled against him every time he was away to war, no less than "nineteen times"; upon his return, he would burn down their capital city in reprisal, then go ahead and rebuild it (Innes 235–237). Clearly, the hero of yesterday has become the tyrant of today, a prototype of many a modern-day African head of state who, in Kirk-Greene's interesting portrait, carries on as though the state belongs to him: *l'etat c'est moi*! Ozidi avenges his father by killing his assassins, then goes further to annihilate every other gross pretender to power in the land of Orua. In the end, the spell-driven hero kills even his own uncle, who is admittedly unfit to hold the title that properly belongs to the family. Although the act has the symbolic function of foreshadowing the ascendancy of the virile young "prince," as I have argued elsewhere ("Performance and Plot" 84), the story ends only with Ozidi laying his conquering sword in the hands of the sorceress Oreame from whom he received his powers (*Ozidi* 387), and no suggestion whatsoever of the political future of the clan. What, then, do we make of a tale that celebrates destructive energies but leaves the state in political vacuity?

Surely, epic study can do with a little more social concern. Contemporary creative writers—Derek Walcott in the Caribbean,[17] Wole Soyinka[18] in Africa, and others—have made revisionist adaptations of ancient myths as a way of interrogating the

controlling ideologies of their nations, toward a healthier sense of political purpose or of cultural identity. If our scholarship continues to show itself unable or unwilling to engage with the crises of our times, it may be in danger of ultimately descending into irrelevance. Foley says, "Don't take Voices from the Past out of context" (*How to Read* 64). But history is never a static process. Because attitudes and ideologies of leadership have remained essentially unchanged across time and place, we *can* connect the silent voices of the past with the urgent voices of today, and recover the political vision that once inspired the epic. So I say, "Always comtemporize!"

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NOTES

1. For detailed accounts of the "Homeric question," see especially Davison, "The Homeric Question"; A. Parry, "Introduction" to *The Making of Homeric Verse*; and Turner, "The Homeric Question." On the role of Pisistratus or his family in the textualization of Homer's epics, see Nagy's authoritative discussion in his *Homeric Questions* 65–106. The arguments of Analysts and Unitarians has been extended by more recent scholars generally known as Neo-analysts who, despite pointing to sources in the larger "epic cycle" of tales about the Trojan war from which Homer might have borrowed material for his own accounts, essentially adhere to the Unitarian view that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the work of one man. On Neo-analysts, see Clark, "Neoanalysis"; Willcock, "Neoanalysis"; Burgess, *Tradition of the Trojan War* 61–4.

2. In a story I collected from Ubulu-Uno in midwestern Nigeria in 1981, about a chieftaincy contest in a neighboring town (Ogwashi-Uku), a spectator openly challenged the claims of the narrator (Charles Simayi) to have been one of the confidants appointed by the paramount chief of Ogwashi-Uku to judge the contest: see my "Oral Tradition" 219–221. However, the best record of an African oral narrative performance in which a narrator continually struggles with challenges from his audience is Clark[-Bekederemo]'s (ed.) *The Ozidi Saga.*

3. Niane, *Sundiata* 37. Notice that Tounkara first appoints Sunjata viceroy *before* announcing his decision to his army and people. It is telling of such autocratic kingdoms of the past that, as we are told, "the people love all who assert themselves over them." Of the numerous other versions of the Sunjata legend, the most authoritative, in terms of editorial care for text and context, are Gordon Innes, *Sunjata* and John W. Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara.*

4. In yet another tale I collected from Charles Simayi of Ubulu-Uno, in which one member of his village council volunteers to rescue the abducted wife of a fellow councilor when the latter is too scared to do so himself, Simayi prefaces his account by characterizing the bygone days of heroes as

AN AGE WHEN MEN SPOKE WITH THE POINT OF THE MATCHETE.

When whoever showed no daring would not join in such drinking as we have laid out here on the table.

See my "Towards a Faithful Record" 127.

5. See especially Part Four of Tedlock's *The Spoken Word* and his two contributions to *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*: his chapter "Interpretation, Participation" and the Introduction to the book (written jointly with Bruce Mannheim).

6. On the turbulent career of Chief Remi Fani-Kayode in the Nigerian politics of the 1960s, see especially Post and Vickers, *Structure and Conflict* 88–101, 121–123, 225–226, and Dudley, *Instability and Political Order* 42, 51, 104.

7. Okabou the narrator periodically credits his predecessors Atazi and Ozobo as inspirations for his narrative career: see especially *The Ozidi Saga* 202–203, 155, 157.

8. On the sixth night of performance of *The Ozidi Saga*, in Okabou's narration of the slug-fest in which Ozidi's and Odogu's [grand]mothers egg the two sons on as they endlessly batter each other with the deadliest weapons, a member of the narrator's audience laments, "Look at them playing with children born with such labor!" (303). Chances are that the comment has come from a woman and may easily enough be viewed as a gynecological gut reaction. Seen in the context of the political troubles of the time, when rival political parties were co-opting youths into rival gangs where some of them lost their lives in defense of politicians, the comment indeed takes on a more significant dimension, for it reflects fears of the growth of violence among partisan groups that was to lead not only to the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), in which many youths lost their lives, but also to the entrenchment of armed violence by youths as a factor of social and political conflict in the country today.

9. For a curious study of "the statistics of verse-making" in Homer very much along Parryan lines, see Ahuvia Kahane's "Quantifying Epic."

10. Ruth Scodel has, quite cogently I think, warned against assuming a harmony of sensibilities between narrators and audiences or even among audiences: see *Listening to Homer* 7–8, 10, 13.

11. As Tedlock has observed from his experience of recording Zuni tales, "we tend to keep our mouths shut, even when local custom demands a responsive audience" ("From Voice and Ear" 137). Melville and Frances Herskovits also tell us of their recording of a Dahomean narrator who is thoroughly disoriented when he does not get from them the sort of vocal responses he usually received from traditional narrative audiences (*Dahomean Narrative* 52). Compare also Robert Cancel's experience in recording narratives among the Tabwa of Zambia (*Allegorical Speculation* 59).

12. In a more recent statement on modern oral epics, Foley is in sympathy with studies "not deferring to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the archetypes (the 'original sin' of comparative epic studies)" ("Analogues" 199) and endeavors to demonstrate "that the category of oral epic must be conceived very broadly lest we fall victim to a textual brand of 'Homer-centrism" (210).

13. Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* offers ample pointers to pitfalls in the concept of tradition in historical and humanistic studies. Foley has also consulted Ben-Amos's pivotal essay "The Seven Strands of *Tradition*," though he appears to have made rather selective use of insights from the essay. Ruth Scodel's introductory chapter to her *Listening to Homer* is essentially at variance with Foley's view of the concept of tradition, suggesting that his idea of "traditional referentiality" is fraught with "misunderstanding" of the inventiveness shown by narrators telling the same stories in a variety of situations (11–12). For further observations on the dual concepts of "tradition" and "traditionality" in Homeric studies, see Haubold's "Homer after Parry."

14. Willcock's essay, "Mythological Paradeigma in the *Iliad*," cites other examples of Homer's use of this technique. See also Andersen, "Myth, Paradigm and Spatial Form" and Scodel, *Listening to Homer* 24–26, 135–140 for further discussions of this device. On "ring composition" as a technique of epic narrative composition, see my *Epic in Africa* 194–201, which includes demonstration of the influence of audience participation in the achievement of the ring structure.

15. On the basis of my argument, we would need to expand the number of times both Scott Richardson (174) and de Jong ("Homer and Narratology" 315) believe Homer addresses his audience directly in his epics. In her *Oral Poetry*, Ruth Finnegan tells us: "Direct address to the audience is [. . .] peculiarly appropriate to oral literature. It is surprising that it does not occur more often" (118). Evidently, it "does not occur" because until ethnopoetics drew attention to the relevance of contextual factors, most editors expunged them from their transcripts. In the case of the Niobe tale, Homer's editors may have cavalierly rolled it into Achilles's speech to Priam, thus imposing on him a garrulity that is quite out of place or character.

16. "Any successful performance of narrative, whether oral or written, must speak meaningfully to vital and contemporary concerns of its audience" (Scodel, *Listening* 32).

17. Derek Walcott's insertion of Homer into his postcolonial/postmodernist vision of Caribbean culture and history has attracted a great deal of critical attention. Besides focused book-length discussions of Walcott's two Homeric volumes, e.g., Robert Hamner's *Epic of the Dispossessed*, and special journal issues—e.g., of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (edited by Gregson Davis) and *Classical World* (edited by Timothy Hofmeister)—featuring articles mostly by classicists, there have been numerous reviews of the two adaptations as well as individual periodical essays like my "Walcott, Homer, and the Black Atlantic," Lorna Hardwick's "Singing Across the Faultlines," and monographs on Walcott by scholars like Paul Breslin, Bruce King, and Edward Baugh.

18. In "Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire," I have offered a focused discussion of Soyinka's postcolonial adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which the Nigerian poet-dramatist makes a radical revision of the ritual and political image of Dionysus in line with the mythology of the Yoruba god Ogun and Soyinka's own ideological dispositions.