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African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity by Isidore Okpewho

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AFRICA & THE WEST INDIES

Isidore Okpewho. African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity. Bloomington. Indiana University Press. 1992. xii + 392 pages. \$18.95.

Along with the publication of his two earlier scholarly works, *The Epic in Africa* (1979) and *Myth in Africa* (1983), Isidore Okpewho's latest book, *African Oral Literature*, seems to have completed the natural course of scholarship "in the field," as Africanists continue their scholarly attempts at (re)visioning/(re)writing African oral traditions and literatures from an "insider" perspective--from the horse's mouth, so to speak. This three-part study provides an in-depth, systematic update and analysis of the history, character, and literary influence of African oral literature. Part 1 (chapters 1-5), "Backgrounds and Resources," establishes the framework for the study in a well-articulated, critical "then and now" historical survey of the discipline, as it examines the hitherto neglected subject of the creative genius of the artist, the nature and stylistic qualities of oral performance, and their social relevance. Part 2 (chapters 6-9), "Types and Themes," focuses on the analysis of a selected variety of texts. Part 3 (chapters 10-12), "The Survival of Oral Literature," defines and delineates the significant twin relationship and continuity between African oral and literate cultures. In these days of "orality/orature" parlance, this comprehensive survey at once updates and expands Ruth Finnegan's monumental work, *Oral Literature in Africa*.

Though seemingly ambitious, the scope of *African Oral Literature* makes no large claims beyond the "attempt to crystalize the benefits gained from years of intellectual dialogue and to put the central issues of the subject in much clearer focus." To this end, the study concentrates on evidence collected from sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn, opting to cover a representative sampling of illustrative oral literary texts "from a realistically broad cultural geography." The choice of literature instead of tradition in the title is significant, as Okpewho diligently delineates early in the volume the literary nature and merit of African oral literature, from the artistic merit of the oral artist to the literary merit of the modern African writer.

The exegesis of the abundant, carefully selected, illustrative texts reflects scholarly diligence, giving a definitive accounting of the vibrancy of oral traditions in Africa today, from their "functional or practical values within society" to their creative influence on and survival in modern African literature. The kinship between African oral literature and modern African literature cannot be mistaken, because "many modern African writers consciously borrow techniques and ideas from their oral tradition in constructing works dealing essentially with modern life."

The fluidity and warmth of the language of *African Oral Literature* evidences Okpewho's expert facility with and appreciation of the texts, which seem imbued with a sense of immediacy and a credulity that only a collector-participant experience can effect. In other words, Okpewho's style is very much in character with the contexts

of the texts. The refreshing new-voiceness and established authority of the volume's scholarship undoubtedly cast Okpewho as the leading expert in the field. For literary critics and comparatists who are preoccupied with the issues of literary influence, African Oral Literature is an invaluable resource. Truly a tour de force of individual scholarship for other scholarly work to come.

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