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## **Subversive traditions: reinventing the West African epic**

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### **Citation**

Jansen, J. A. M. M. (2020). Subversive traditions: reinventing the West African epic. *H-Net Reviews In The Humanities And Social Sciences*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3254564>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



**Jonathon Repinecz.** *Subversive Traditions: Reinventing the West African Epic*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019. 336 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-61186-334-5.

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**Published on** H-Africa (April, 2020)

**Commissioned by** David D. Hurlbut (Boston University)

Jonathon Repinecz has made a major contribution to the study of African literature by offering new insights into African epic, not least through his mastery of literary and oral traditions alike. He places in the foreground the critical powers of the oral tradition as expressed by griots in their performances and by present-day writers in their novels. In addition, Repinecz reveals the deep racial presumptions inherent in the early discussions of epic in Africa. The first chapters add a new dimension to the discussion of the classical question, does an epic exist in Africa? and thereafter the book slowly guides the reader on a journey through the riches and creativity of West African literature, both oral and written.

I recommend this book not only to those interested in African literature but, perhaps even more strongly, to those who have searched for information about Africa's past in oral traditions. My reason for this appeal is the pivotal position of the Sunjata epic in Jonathon Repinecz's analysis, for the Sunjata epic has not only served as evidence for the very existence of epic in Africa, but functions equally well for the author as an important frame of reference for his explanation of literary creativity *through tradition*.

The book's title, *Subversive Traditions*, summarizes the author's mission well. For Repinecz, "tradition" is actually a concept of modernity, since

the idea of tradition is based on pillars of modernity including (1) the conception of time as linear, (2) the belief in history as development or progress, and (3) the belief in individual human agency in both making the future and preserving the past. Such an academic definition of tradition stands, of course, in contrast to "old and authentic," which is what "tradition" is commonly imagined to be. In the introductory chapter the idea of tradition as a modern concept is clearly explained—and linked to Afromodernity and to seminal work done in 1990 by Nicholas Dirks. However, I found the suggested link with modernization in the sense of an increase in scale, urbanization, rationalization, and technical innovation less convincing, because the author has no need for any such link in his argument.

The term "subversive" in *Subversive Traditions* refers to the dialogic nature of epic. As Repinecz points out, such literature is "subversive—dangerous—because it interrogates the Big Men and ideological paradigms of African historical experience" (p. 42). By giving convincing examples of how the griots contrive such interrogation in their oral performances, the author effectively criticizes those who see mainly fixed, archaic, and ancient knowledge preserved in epics. The griots' interrogation is a creative process by which they deal as perform-

ers with questions of their own time. Repinecz concludes that “oral narratives, like written ones, can be studied from a literary point of view,” as intellectual products (p. 60).

The book owes its analytical coherence to its introductory chapter and its first chapter. In terms of case material the emphasis shifts throughout the book. We move from the published oral texts of the Mande world to Senegal and a focus on novelists’ and other artists’ creativity. For me, as a historian working on Mande oral traditions, the first half of the book was therefore the most challenging and inspiring. I think I should further explain my fascination.

In chapter 1, “The Racialization of Comparative Literature,” Repinecz spells out how the French colonial administration in the first half of the twentieth century attributed a higher level of civilization to peoples who had produced epics, defining epics as tradition preserved from empires. I would now argue that recent research has strengthened the author’s argument to study the epic as a product of literary creativity.[1] The same French scholar-administrators who wrote on epics had constructed an incorrect reading of the late-medieval sources on medieval West African polities: there appears to be little reason to label medieval Ghana, Mali, and Songhai as “empires.” Labeling some polities as “empires” is not just a semantic error or/and a misinterpretation of their level of centralization. Because of the empire’s definition on the basis of epics, the label of empire denies a form civilization to other ethnic groups on the basis of an argument that combines a racist interpretation (Repinecz’s argument) with a philological error (the incorrect understanding of medieval sources that led scholars to the belief in empires). I would therefore conclude that when African epics are discussed in terms of even the vaguest possible link to a medieval empire, or vice versa, *tautological* (not triangulated) historical evidence is created or reproduced for both empires and epics—even by the scholars who are not in

search of a definition for either epic.[2] On the basis of this argument, I welcome even more Repinecz’s study of West African epics as the product of literary creativity: this argument suggests that the Sunjata epic *in toto* is a tradition (i.e., a product of modernity) *without* any historical genesis in a medieval empire.

I end this review with an epistemological reflection inspired by my fieldwork in the area of Kangaba, where people feel strongly related to the history of the Mali empire. Repinecz’s approach of reading an oral narrative like the Sunjata epic “from a literary point of view” seems self-evident and might even appear a harmless approach. Although this literary angle is acceptable and sound for the production of academic knowledge, it is unacceptable for the numerous people in West Africa who proudly trace their descent from the alleged medieval empires.[3] Epics do not only confirm or “interrogate the Big Men and ideological paradigms of African historical experience,” they also offer people an identity (p. 42). In the end, a literary angle is sacrilege for those whose personal historical and ethnic identity encompasses the great deeds of their epic ancestors. For Repinecz, West African writers and artists are the heroes of his study on every page of the book—as he attributes to their interpretation of the African epic a place in Africa’s future (as a “tradition”). For me, it was a convincing argument supported by rich evidence, but I have also experienced that critical (or is “orthodox” here a better term?) West Africans might argue that such a creative reinvention reproduces the previous academic contempt for oral history as valid source for factual historical information. Now should we actually ask, is either of the two approaches to epic right or wrong? Or should we settle instead for a postmodern cease-fire by agreeing that epics like Sunjata acquire different meanings in different epistemologies?

#### Notes

[1]. Hadrien Collet, “L’Introuvable Capitale du Mali: La Question de la Capitale dans

l'historiographie du Royaume Médiéval du Mali,” *Afriques* 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1098>, and “Les Souvenirs du Mali: Les Sultanat Médiéval et Royaume Tardif du Mali comme Horizons Mémoires en Afrique de l'Ouest (XVIIe-XIXe siècles),” *Afriques* 12 (2020), forthcoming.

[2]. To overcome tautologies in historical research, Hadrien Collet studied medieval Mali by bypassing “evidence” from the Sunjata epic. See Collet’s critical review of Michael Gomez’s *African Dominion* that has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of African History*. Jan Jansen studied the Sunjata epic by downsizing and rejecting conclusions historians have drawn from Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun. See Jan Jansen, “Beyond the Mali Empire: A New Paradigm for the Sunjata Epic,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 317-40.

[3]. That was shown to me in a dramatic way by a young scholar from Mali after he had read my argument that the Sunjata epic has deeper historical layers than medieval Mali (Jansen, “Beyond the Mali Empire”). He remarked: “Your analysis is very convincing. But there is one problem: It is our history.” My Malian scholar friend might well offer a similar objection, saying, as it were, “Hands off our history!” to Repinecz’s literary approach that reads the epic mainly as a product of modernity.

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**Citation:** Jan Jansen. Review of Repinecz, Jonathon. *Subversive Traditions: Reinventing the West African Epic*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54645>



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