

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

SUB SAHARAN AFRICAN CULTURE – Postclassical Period

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Overview In the overview to our earlier entry, on ancient Sub Saharan African culture, we highlighted the importances of religion and the non-verbal arts, as expressions of the formative stages of culture in that Africa which brought us, more than 200,000 years B.C.E., the first samples of *human beings*. We remarked that in the absence of an early written record, we are limited in the kinds of insight we can hope for, into the cultural development of ancient Africa. The same limitations apply, to what we can say about the ‘postclassical’ in Sub Saharan African culture; the Sub Saharan never having enjoyed a ‘classical’ age, in anything like that of the ‘western’ classificatory system, which had the Greco Roman experience as its baseline. We can speak of this period as transitional, formative for the development of various stages of regional empires, as in Ghana, the Congo, and East Africa. In this entry we will address ourselves to four salient aspects of this millennium of African development; the diversification of pre-written African languages; developments in African architecture and astronomy, respectively; and the growth of a great oral epic literature.

Language families The same schools of thinking that undergird Darwinian evolutionary theory, in biology, support the notion that language development accrues by a meaningful developmental history, stages following one another by a pattern some see as constantly meliorative, goal-directed. It is a recent conviction that all human languages derive from a common mother, in Africa, and that speech emerged in such communities between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago--coeval with the first modern humans, our first Africans. (An up to the minute measure of the distance of non-African languages, from the African mother-root, is the number of phonemes in a given language, the greater the number of useable phonemes proving to be the evidence for the greatest antiquity; a yardstick by which proto-African Sub Saharan language proves its unique antiquity.) Extrapolating from these calculations we can estimate that new language formation and development was particularly active during the postclassical millennium in Africa, when many of the 1436 Niger Congo languages, the Bantu languages, were evolving into fully developed means of verbal communication.

Scripts Language evolution and the evolution of writing naturally go hand in hand. The development of languages during the post classical period and later was deeply modified by the introduction of writing scripts appropriate to formalizing those languages.

Old Nubian Old Nubian script (8th cent. C.E.-15th cent. C.E.), a variation on both Coptic and Greek orthographies, was in most recent use during the Christian Kingdom of Makuria, in Northern Sudan. The most recent written example of this script dates from 1485 C.E.

Arabic Far the most influential non-European language script, from postclassical Africa to our times, is Arabic. In 639 C.E. the first Muslim Arabs entered Egypt, and it is estimated that today more than 140 million Africans speak Arabic as their first language. A wide but scattered population, from within that number, uses Arabic today as their first *written* language. (Arabic script derives from Aramaic, it from Phoenician, and thus Arabic script proves to be a step brother to Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scripts, all of which also derive from Phoenician.) Arabic script was widely distributed in postclassical northern Africa, but through the postclassical southward movements of Islam, both on the coasts and through the desert, Arabic script spread and facilitated language development in postclassical sub Saharan Africa.

Architecture For sake of a sharper term, ‘mediaeval’ may do to cover the marvelous growth period of high African architectural achievements which embraces such cultural work as the great Malian mosques of Djenne, Mopti, and Timbuktu--all brought to peak form and use in the 13th century C.E.--the earlier Great Mosque of Kairouan (7th-9th centuries C.E.), and the complex of Great Zimbabwe, whose first occupation dates back to the 2nd century C.E., and whose peak stage of continuous development dates to the 15th century C.E. While mediaeval, in the Western European sense, means the ‘middle age,’ which lies between the Greco-Roman classical and the Renaissance, the same term demands a much more complex definition in Africa. The great mosques of Mali, and the rich Dogon caves culture nearby, represent a lofty set of cultural-structural achievements unique in Africa. (Djenne, the largest clay edifice in the world, lofty and prickly with its spines of exposed structure, is as mind-blowing as the Cathedral of Chartres, or Notre Dame de Paris.) On the other hand the structures of Great Zimbabwe, which were in

process of expansion for centuries, which followed their curvilinear forms up hill down dale along the plumb line of 36 foot walls, represent a bewilderingly rich living complex. When we learn that there were some 300 such complexes scattered across the present country of Zimbabwe, we shake our heads at the audacity of mediaeval African architecture.

Oral literature

Sundiata The *Sundiata* oral epic was created to celebrate the heroism of the founder of the Empire of Mali, Sundiata Keita (ruled 1235-1255 C.E.). The poem was an oral creation, caught on, and was (we assume) passed on in different versions to the descendants of the 'initial creator.' Even whether there was such an initial creator is up to speculation, as are all details concerning the ancient genealogy of this epic poem. (Almost all; we have references to the epic in such then contemporary Arabic discussion as that of Ibn Khaldun.) A translation into French prose, in 1960, proved highly successful, was itself converted into English five years later, and is today the commonly read present form of the epic. (From 13th century Bamako to the American college classroom--a long trek!) In modern times the epic has been staged as a play, recited by the greatest living Malian griots (see below), and has established itself as the national trademark of Malian literary culture.

Style of Sundiata *Sundiata* was a narrated poem, in which the griot (singer, narrator) held the audience spellbound, while he himself assumed, within the narration, a number of registers, from plain teller to commentator to putative audience-member voice. (So multiple and highly trained were the skills of the griot--who in fact added, to his purely narrative skills, an ability to interpret the day's news, pass on bits of gossip, and predict the community's future.) We are to imagine this poem narration as traditional entertainment on the highest level, a charm to all, as was the typical recital of Homer's work, or, within the *Odyssey*, the delight of the audience as Homer describes the narrations of the great bard Phemius.

The Mwindo Epic The Mwindo epic, undatable in the way of *Sundiata*, whose reality was historical, was in play at the time of Sundiata. It was the folk creation of the Nyanga people, of the Congo; a mythical epic tale performed, rather than recited, by a single griot. (The griot acted all the parts, and accompanied himself with a calabash and ringing bells, as well as with personal commentary, both on the poem before him and on matters of interest in the community. Worth noting: audience participation was expected and desired, and among audience attitudes the griot valued the audience approbation of changes in the oral material.)

The two epics in themselves Quite apart from the engaging and vibrant presentational setting, of the two epics in question, we look with diverse amazements at the tales before us.

Mwindo *Mwindo* is a myth-phantasmagoria. Just listen. The King needs money, and so declares that his seven wives can bear only female heirs--so that there will be an abundance of bride-prices coming into the royal treasury; any male child will be killed. As it happened, the seventh wife had a prolonged pregnancy, which raised anxieties at court, and eventually gave birth to a male child, Mwindo, who emerges from her middle finger. Equipped only with an adze, and a bagful of spiritual powers, Mwindo makes his way into a terror filled world--his dad trying in every possible way to kill him--and eventually escapes all threats, in a hair's-breadth and heroic ride, in a drum, through torrents of slashing water.

Sundiata Folklore heroics, in *Sundiata*, find their way to another brand of survivalism. This epic still today defines the Mandinke national self-awareness, along with a story which blends themes from world culture. The Mande king, Nare Konate, is told to marry an ugly woman who will bear him a great king, and just that he does. In the ensuing scorn-fest, with which the royal court greets this degrading choice, Sundiata and his ugly mom, Sogdolon, are driven into exile. The young hero to be, Sundiata, is crippled and barely able to walk, but by force of will, inner strength training, he gradually renders himself strong, upright, and ready to destroy his enemies--which he does. The listener, tracking the drama of this kingly power, is given full pride in himself, a potential hero. The modern reader will be thinking of Oedipus--the club footed; of Philoctetes--the gangrenous holder of the power of the bow; or even of Job, who endures.

Astronomy The center of postclassical astronomy, as well as of literate Sub Saharan scholarship, was in the Malian cities of Djenne and in the university city of Timbuktu. In the former, florid still today in the cliffs around Bandiagara, traditional lore recounts the Dogon people's (then millennial) understanding of star movements, the

orbits of the moon and stars, of Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moon, and particularly the movements of Sirius B, the to modern astronomers still virtually invisible twin shadow star to Sirius A. The ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu, many dating from the 12th to the 17th centuries C.E., are being translated as we speak, and disclose accurate stellar measurements rivalled only by the latest telescopes of our day.

What can we know about postclassical Sub Saharan African culture? While the postclassical In Europe is still called The Dark Ages, that period enjoyed the widespread use of writing, thus was able to give an account of itself pretty completely missing in 'postclassical' Africa.' In assessing postclassical Sub Saharan Africa, probably, we will focus on the monumental architectures of Mali and Zimbabwe, the great literary archives and University instruction in Timbuktu in the 13th-15th centuries, then, of course, on the epic tradition which clusters around Sundiata.

Reading

Bowra, C.M., *Heroic Poetry*, London, 1966.

Cope, A.T., *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*, Oxford, 1978.

Eglash, Ron, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*, Rutgers, 1999.

Finnegan, Ruth, *Oral Poetry*, Cambridge, 1977.

Okpewho, Isidore, *The Oral Performance in Africa*, Ibadan, 1990.

Hull, Richard, *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest*, New York, 1976.

Discussion questions

Does Mali of the fourteenth century seem to you to have been the site of an architectural Renaissance? What did the architecture of Timbuktu contribute to that Renaissance?

Are there identifiably great Individual architects behind the major achievements of African architecture? Was architecture itself considered to be a separate skill, like mask-making or painting?

What efforts are being made, in Africa, to preserve endangered monuments of architectural significance? Have Africans themselves an interest in preserving their own past? Or is that matter left to the rest of the world?

What have *Sundiata* and *The Mwindo Epic* in common? Is there a common theme of the vulnerability of the hero, then of the hero's tough ability to rebound? What, about those themes, might have appealed to the makers of these two epics?

In *The Oral Performance in Africa*, Okpewho stresses the trendiness of the griot role in West African entertainment culture today. Competition for the best television performance/rendition of *Sundiata*? Can you think of an equivalent entertainment event in the industrialized west?

What does 'performance' of African epic poetry mean, beyond the narration of the language? Dance? Musical accompaniment; appropriate clothing? Is there something of 'opera' in this kind of oral poetry?