
The scribe, the griot and the novelist who provide the main title of this book are three kinds of narrator who present different descriptions and interpretations of the West African Songhay empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Each represents a different mode of cultural expression: the scribe provides us with the Islamic chronicles written not long after the decline of the empire (the *Tarikh el-Fattach* and the *Tarikh es-Soudan*), the griot gives us an oral recitation which has been handed down and revised through the generations (the original example transliterated and translated here is given the title *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*), while the novelist gives us a stark account of the violence and corruption of the ancient empires with indirect allusions to the actions and behaviour of Africa’s contemporary leadership (Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le Devoir de Violence*). The historical and literary links between these narrative forms are brought out, and the limitations each has in expressing the cultural values of the Songhay-speaking peoples are then discussed. Each style of narrative, it is argued, has its own audience; none speaks to the West African, or even the Songhay, audience as a whole. The scribe, the griot and the novelist are each specialists in bringing out the voices of competing cultural traditions. The narratives that are presented and compared are among the greatest creative achievements that have come out of Africa. Hale’s book is thus more than an enriched account of an ancient African empire: it is a resource which enables us to understand a selection of brilliant works that represent diverse forms of expression in the West African Sahel.

This book has two principal strengths. First, it presents us with an original oral recitation by the accomplished praise-singer Nouhou Malio. One cannot help but speculate how long such traditions of memorization and recitation, which require a lifetime for the performer to perfect, can survive in a milieu that continues to be transformed by literacy, bureaucracy and technology. The oral narrative included here reminds us that many remembered traditions have a tenacity that defies predictions of universal westernization and cultural homogenization. Second, we are given an extended comparison between the Muslim chronicles and the oral
narrative that brings out interesting differences between the mediums of expression and the audiences to which they are directed. The novel, a third point of comparison, provides us with one main point: that this style of literacy, as opposed to the ideological support for established power provided by the Muslim chronicles and the oral recitation, serves a critical function.

What seems to be missing from the analysis is a clear sense that these narrative styles are products of cultural traditions that are in tension and sometimes in open conflict. The focus is on narrative forms themselves and because of this it strays away from the concrete reality of a contemporary world where reformed Islam, western education and oral tradition are pitted against one another in what sometimes becomes intense rivalry. The wider context is largely absent from this book and the implications of the comparison between forms of cultural expression are therefore limited. Although this is a work that can be loosely classified as 'literary criticism', even a small amount of historical/sociological grounding would have gone a long way. In terms of the arguments that are presented, perhaps the least convincing is found in the concluding commentary on the 'autonomous model of literacy', as represented by the work of Jack Goody. Hale suggests that the permanency of ideas is not an important consequence of Islamic literacy and that, in fact, the chronicles of the Songhay empire reflect elements of oral fluidity. For him, the interesting locus of comparison is in the ideas conveyed by the oral and literal narrators and how these reflect the needs and aspirations of their audiences. The exponent of the 'autonomous model' could reply, however, that there is little evidence here of great impermanence in the written narrative. Moreover, the inherent flexibility of the oral recitation is not brought out clearly because the process of recording and transforming it into written form by an impressive group of linguists limits the contrast between the written and the remembered. Although Hale does not adequately defend himself against this kind of counterargument, I agree with his general point that "literacy per se does not confer a significant change upon society" (163). This conclusion could be more strongly supported by the fact that writing in highly literate Timbuktu did not lead to an intellectual or bureaucratic revolution but instead reflected and supported the interests of those in power.

The positive contributions of this book outweigh the peripheral