

Full Length Research Paper

Depiction of human society through epic literary genres: A comparative perspective of the function of two African heroic epics

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This study attempts to compare two main literary works. One is Niane's Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali. Another is Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, a Zulu Epic. The study aims at showing how Literature mirrors society through a comparison between the protagonists in the above mentioned epics basing on their heroic characteristics each. This is a qualitative study and is basically concerned with a particular aspect of narrative which is the central character in epic literary genres. The main aim is to depict the image of human being in the world around him through M. Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic J. T. Niane's Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali. The study is framed on Campbell's Theory of The Hero's journey mainly because it involved the quest theme. The researcher looks at the relevance of the epic genres in African society, as well as how literature is a didactic tool at historical, ethical and socio-cultural levels. It has been found that epic literature conveys the message of heroism, patriotism or strong attachment to motherland connected with human's destiny which cannot be altered by human power.

Key words: Heroic epic, protagonist, destiny, quest, the function of literature.

INTRODUCTION

Literary studies reveal that heroic epics are cultural documentations and heroic narratives. Niane's Sundiata, an epic of old Mali and Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, a Zulu Epic are good examples. The two epics reflect the idea of pride, honour and dignity as derived from the deeds performed by extraordinary men. Anyang (2007) contends that those deeds are the yardsticks against which the individual must measure him/herself. Similarly, Okpewho (1979) offers an African conception of the term epic and says that it is fundamentally a tale

about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context. The hero is a representative of the community and his action is centered on the more significant events than the individual as instrument of events. In his review of Okpewho's The Epic in Africa, Kunene (1980) asserts that the African epic often begins from the assumption that individuals in society inherit a set of fundamental social principles or laws that, when violated, often times

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cause the society to degenerate until a hero comes along to reassert them. It is in this context of epic hero conception that this study has been conducted basing on Sundiata and Shaka, heroes of super-human qualities, model warriors and men admired for their achievements and noble qualities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary works come in many shapes and sizes from epic literary genres to jokes. Epics are not new literary forms and are not like other genres. They hold an important place in one literature or another and originate from folklore. Their basic origin is oral tradition and they come to their audiences retold from generation to generation. Kesteloot (1971) says that in all the countries, epics originate from oral tradition and are sung and declaimed before they are put into writing. In these traditions, poetry is transmitted to the audience and from performer to performer by purely oral means. Barnett et al. (1960) contend that epic is a long narrative poem about a hero, of superhuman or divine traits, and his heroic companions. They add that epic is set in a past that is imagined as greater than the present. Accordingly, the epic tradition has been part of many different cultures throughout human history. In Babylonian literature, for example, the most famous composition of this kind is the Epic of Gilgamesh, a moving meditation on love and death but also an exciting story, with harlots, hunters, giant monsters, killer bulls, sexy goddesses, and scorpion-men. According to Mori (n.d.), Gilgamesh can be regarded as the oldest world epic for it dates back to the third millennium B.C and clearly exhibits the three basic elements of epic grandeur such as the hero's great concern with his immortality, the community for whose security he fights, and the wide mythological space that he traverses. Besides the Epic of Gilgamesh, many literary experts consider that the poems to be the best examples of the epic genres are Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*; the Book of Job; Virgil's *Aeneid*; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; *Beowulf*; Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*; and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The Song of Roland (*La Chanson de Roland*) is another epic, the best known of the Old French epics. Literature holds that it was possibly first composed sometime in the 10th or 11th century. In the same realm, Nagy (2006) explores epic literary genres and concludes that Achilles and Odysseus in the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* range among the most representative examples of ancient poetic constructs generally known as "epic heroes".

Lesky (1966) sides with this idea and provides three major ancient classical epics with the heroes such as the Greek Achilles, in the *Iliad*, the Greek Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, and the Trojan Aeneas in the *Aeneid*. He adds that epic heroes come from the heroic era, which precedes the Archaic Age in Ancient Greece and the

founding of Rome by Romulus. Barnett et al. (1960) state that epic is a long narrative poem about a hero, of superhuman or divine traits, and his heroic companions. They add that epic is set in a past that is imagined as greater than the present. Harman and Holman (1992) are of the view that epic is a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race. Johnson et al. (1997) argue on African epics and says that one of the most recorded and published epics in Africa is the foundation narrative of the Mali empire known variably as "Son-Jara," "Sunjata," or "Sundiata." Roberts (1989) puts it that African heroic epics "existed as a vital form of African oral literature at the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and could have easily served as expressive models for spiritual song creation and performance". More importantly, many of the lengthy praise poems, particularly those in South Africa, do contain some epic elements and provide the nearest common parallel to this form in Africa" Finnegan (1977) quoted in Alembi (2002). Epics also recount historical deeds as Merchant (1971) puts it that an epic is a work of art surpassing the dimension of realities and adds that epic is a poem including history. In this regard, in African literature there are heroic epics that depict the history of some of African regions. Mulokozi (2002) makes it clear by arguing on how Ruth Finnegan belief that epic did not occur in Sub Saharan African literature was proved wrong. The idea is that in African literature there are many epics as Okombo and Nandwa (1992) advocate that in Africa there are long narratives recounting in a coherent manner the deeds of a legendary hero with human traits and with supernatural attributes. In this vein, Niane (1965) believes that Sundiata transcended many outstanding leaders that reigned in Africa of his time and added that his deeds surpassed even Alexander the Great's, he who, from the East, shed his rays upon all the countries of the West. Similarly, Kesteloot (1971) stands for Shaka's fame as a warrior who surpassed all his peers, and who drastically changed the history of South African tribes at the beginning of the 19th century. Thus, D.T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* and Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic* may convey some messages to Africans about people's fame, heroism, thus how a work of art reveals people's experiences in a way or another. The two African epics fit for literary studies to depict human being in the world he lives.

Statement of problem

Literature, Frye wrote, is "*the place where our imaginations find the ideal that they try to pass on to belief and action, where they find the vision which is the*

source of both the dignity and the joy of life." And the critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in." It is in this sense that the present study is deemed significant. As heroes are redeemers of oppressed people in one way or another, a study of this kind is didactic to society as Schwarz (2011) asserts that literature has the power to change the readers of the world in one way or another. History can be known through literary works too as Merchant (1971) posits that the epic is a work of art surpassing the dimensions of realities; and that it is a poem including history. Put another way, it is important to demonstrate that heroism is a major concern in African literature and establish here the worldview, especially the cultural beliefs of the particular society that produced an epic. It goes without saying that literary works provide those interested African literature in particular with a much needed, structural and analytical tool for studying heroic epic as centered on the heroes whose deeds results from their more than God given powers all along their lives tool. Sundiata and Shaka are among those African heroes. Literary works conducted on them reveal their fame each as they are exceptional heroes. A study that compares the two heroes basing on their heroic characteristics can be important in that it will reveal a lot in the field of literary analysis. As such, this study intends to examine critically and literarily the epics Sundiata and Shaka by mainly showing in what they are similar besides their differing sides.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to have a deep look into the message that is conveyed through the two African epics as they center on two historical figures that shake the history of the African past. In addition, the study has sought the extent to which epics are often time multi-generic literary forms as Johnson (1980) witnesses. Following closely, much was to be learnt through this study about people's life experiences, how a human being may act for or against his/her fellow and the problem of man's destiny.

Objectives and research questions

This study hinged on the following objectives:

1. To compare Sundiata and Shaka basing on some heroic characteristics that make them differ from other protagonists in African literature;
2. To find out the messages conveyed throughout the epics Sundiata and Shaka;
3. To explore the relevance of the epics to the community in which they are set and even beyond.

From the already stated objectives, a study on Sundiata:

An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka The Great, A Zulu Epic raises a number of questions basing on the two central characters:

1. To what extent are the protagonists Sundiata and Shaka comparable?
2. What messages do the two epics convey?
3. To what extent are they relevant to the African communities?

Therefore, an assumption can be made that "Sundiata and Shaka share a number of heroic characteristics and their marvelous deeds make them part and parcel of highly ranked men among others; characters that we often time encounter in heroic narrative stories in different cultures."

Scope of the study

This study consists of literary analysis and involves African Literature specifically Epic genres. D.T. Niane's Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and M. Kunene's Emperor Shaka The Great, A Zulu Epic are the main focus. The study has been framed on the Campbell's theory of Hero's journey. All aspects are not dealt within this single study. Rather, the focus has been on the central characters basing on their heroic characteristics and themes in each of the two epics reason being those themes and the central characters are interwoven narrative elements. The study investigates the relevance of the two epics to the African community and even beyond only that literature cannot be distanced from society.

Theoretical framework

This study is framed on Campbell's theory of the Hero's Journey as will be discussed later to point out how it can be applied to the study of Sundiata, An epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic. By highlighting the stages of the Hero's journey as identified by an American scholar, Joseph Campbell, the researcher has given a summary of the theory by demonstrating how it fits for this study whereby the protagonists and the themes in each of the two epics are the main foci. Campbell explores the theory of important and survived myths for thousands of years as they share a fundamental structure, which he called the monomyth. In a well-known quote from the introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell summarized the monomyth and describes a number of stages or steps along this journey. According to him, the hero starts in the ordinary world, and receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events (a call to adventure). If the hero accepts the call to enter this strange world, he goes on, the hero must face tasks and

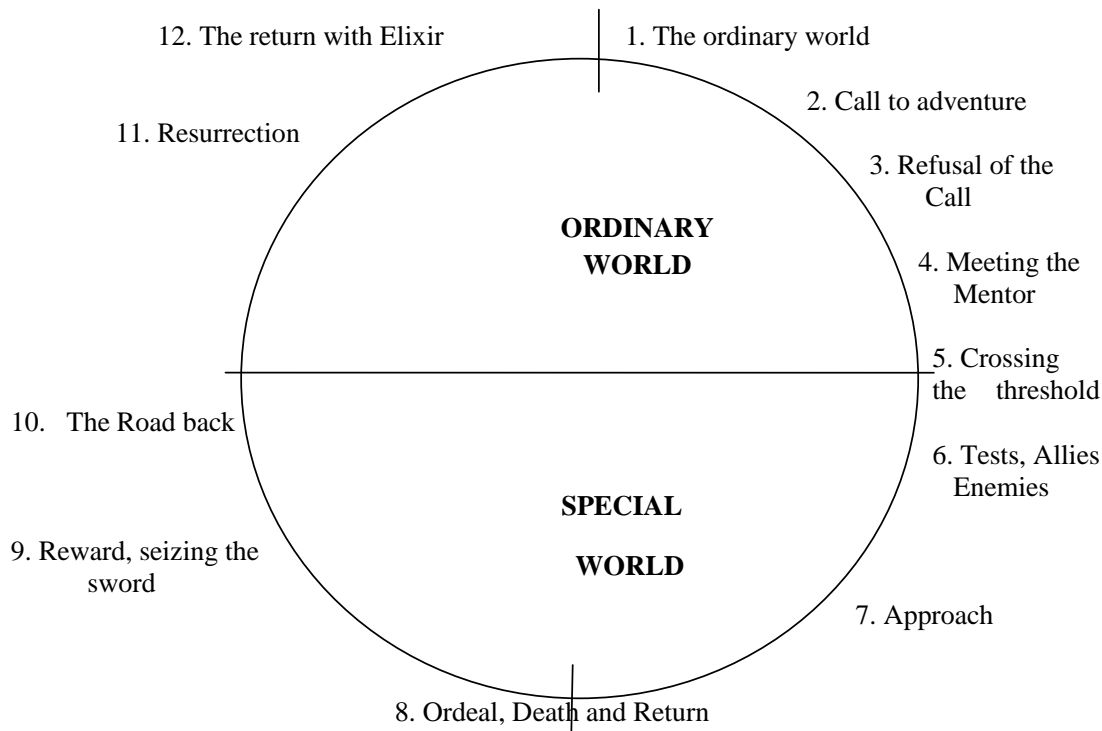


Figure 1. Campbell's hero's journey.

trials (a road of trials), and may have to face these trials alone, or may have assistance. At its most intense, the hero must survive a severe challenge, often with help earned along the journey. If the hero survives, he may achieve a great gift (the goal or "boon"), which often results in the discovery of important self-knowledge. The hero must then decide whether to return with this boon (the return to the ordinary world), often facing challenges on the return journey. If the hero is successful in returning, the boon or gift may be used to improve the world (the application of the boon). These stages may be organized in a number of ways, including division into three sections: Departure (sometimes called Separation), Initiation and Return. "Departure" deals with the hero venturing forth on the quest, "Initiation" deals with the hero's various adventures along the way, and "Return" deals with the hero's return home with knowledge and powers acquired on the journey. Campbell's hero's journey is outlined in Figure 1.

The stages of the hero's journey in line with Sundiata and Shaka

The Hero's Journey is a pattern of narrative identified by the American scholar Joseph Campbell that appears in drama, storytelling, myth, religious ritual, and psychological development. It describes the typical adventure of the archetype known as the Hero, the

person who goes out and achieves great deeds on behalf of the group, tribe, or civilization. Sundiata and Shaka fit some of these stages as discussed below.

The hero is introduced in his/her ordinary world. Most stories ultimately take us to a special world, a world that is new and alien to its hero. This is the birth of the hero. We can see how the birth of any child takes him to the world of ordinary men and it (the child) begins his life journey. Concerning Sundiata, this matches a time when he is born from the womb of Sogolon. Shaka fits this point, too, when Nandi gives birth to him. Concerning the call to adventure, the hero is presented with a problem, challenge or adventure. As far as Sundiata and Shaka are concerned, this stage is reflected by the fact that Sassouma wanted to kill Sundiata on the one hand, a similar situation to Senzangakhona planning to kill Shaka. As such, their call to adventure is a stage that they both cannot escape and skip. Their adventures are inevitable. At stage three where the hero is reluctant at first (Refusal of the call), Sundiata and Shaka are not very reluctant at this stage. Rather they are motivated since they are the object of destiny which is pushing them unbeknownst of them. Often at this point the hero balks at the threshold of adventure. After all, he or she is facing the greatest of all fears – fear of the unknown. At the fourth stage, the hero is encouraged by the Wise Old Man or Woman (Meeting with the mentor). At this point, the mentor gives advice and sometimes magical weapons. The mentor can go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the

unknown by himself. Sometimes the Wise Old Man/Woman is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going. As regard Sundiata and Shaka, one can say that mentoring was carried out by their mothers with whom they go far away from their fatherlands. Stage five concerns the hero passing the first threshold (Crossing the threshold). The hero fully enters the special world of the story for the first time. This is the moment at which the story takes off and the adventure gets going. The balloon goes up, the romance begins, the spaceship blasts off, the wagon train gets rolling. Concerning Sundiata and Shaka, this is time when they take a long and hazardous journey in search of asylum together with their mothers. The hero encounters tests and helpers (tests, allies, and enemies) at stage six of the journey outlined by Campbell. The hero is forced to make allies and enemies in the special world, and to pass certain tests and challenges that are part of his/her training. In our two epics, this begins with gaining hospitality from place to place. In Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic, this is time when Shaka is in exile. As he was gifted, his deeds made it possible to win many friends and allies among the Quabes, and then in the Mtethwa Kingdom. As for Sundiata, it is time when he is sojourning at Djedeba, his first place of asylum. We can see that when he was in Mema, he fits this stage.

The hero reaches the innermost cave (approach to the innermost cave) and this is stage seven whereby the hero comes at last to a dangerous place, often deep underground, where the object of the quest is hidden. As far as Sundiata and Shaka are concerned, this stage may be reflected by dangerous situations that would end up their lives while in exile. At this stage, it is important to know that Sundiata and Shaka were even pursued in exile. Senzangakhona had already bribed most of the kingdoms that would secure Shaka and his mother. Similarly, Sasouma's hatred vis-à-vis Sundiata and his mother did not stop. She even pursued them but in vain. However, they escaped from those dangers and gained more life experience and skills. At stage eight, the hero endures the supreme ordeal. This is the moment at which the hero touches bottom. He/she faces the possibility of death, brought to the brink in a fight with a mythical beast. This is a critical moment in any story, an ordeal in which the hero appears to die and be born again. It is a major source of the magic of the hero myth. What happens is that the audience has been led to identify with the hero. We are encouraged to experience the brink-of-death feeling with the hero. We are temporarily depressed, and then we are revived by the hero's return from death. The initiate is forced to taste death and experience resurrection. If we can go to Sundiata, this is time when he faced Soumaoro, a sorcerer King who had become invincible and feared from place to place. Thanks to Nana Triban and his griot Balla Fasseke, captured long before, revealed him the secrets of Soumaoro, and he (Sundiata)

defeated that wicked king. Stage nine of Campbell's hero's journey shows the hero seizing the sword (Seizing the sword, reward). Having survived death, beaten the dragon, the hero now takes possession of the treasure he has come seeking. Sometimes it is a special weapon like a magic sword or some elixir which can heal the wounded land. Shaka, at this stage, killed the forest bandit "Mad Giant" which had threatened the whole region. Of that deed, hats off, respect, and reward are paid to him as that bandit had become a great menace. The road back now takes place as stage ten. The hero is not out of the woods yet. Some of the best chase scenes come at this point, as the hero is pursued by the vengeful forces from whom he has stolen the elixir or the treasure. If the hero has not yet managed to reconcile with his father or the gods, they may come raging after him at this point. Resurrection is the next stage where the hero emerges from the special world, transformed by his/her experience. There is often a replay here of the mock death-and-rebirth of Stage 8, as the hero once again faces death and survives. Sundiata and Shaka fit this stage in that, as argued on stage twelve, exile taught them a lot and time is then ripe to apply their skills as destiny is not easy to deviate. The last stage is called Return with the Elixir. The hero comes back to the ordinary world, but the adventure would be meaningless unless he/she brought back the elixir, treasure, or some lesson from the special world. Sometimes it is just knowledge or experience, but unless he comes back with the elixir or some boon to mankind, he's doomed to repeat the adventure until he does. Many comedies use this ending, as a foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place. For Sundiata and Shaka, this is time they seize their identity that they were deprived of at their very birth. It is worth noting here that Sundiata chased away Sosso Balla and Soumaoro. As such, he takes back Balla Fasseke his griot taken by Soumaoro long before. As for Shaka, it is a ripe time when he is comforted against the tears caused by his father's when denial of his right to be an heir while it was foretold by prophecies. We can see them transformed into knowledgeable and talented men at different levels. Skills they have acquired from exile are going to help them shape their empire and expand them.

To put it simply, the hero is introduced in his ordinary world where he receives the call to adventure. He is reluctant at first to cross the first threshold where he eventually encounters tests, allies and enemies. He reaches the innermost cave where he endures the supreme ordeal. He seizes the sword or the treasure and is pursued on the road back to his world. He is resurrected and transformed by his experience and finally returns to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or elixir to benefit his world. Thus far, the present study is framed on Campbell's theory of Hero's journey. The theory fits for this study in that it bears in mind that, in

epic, the core events lead to the birth of the hero, the hero's youth, and exile, and the hero's return to reconquer his nation from the enemy.

METHODOLOGY

Literary studies involve various approaches and techniques. It is often hard, if not impossible, to apply all of them in a single study. It is also believed that a combination of more than one approach can be more effective in that the weaknesses of one are covered by the strengths of another. Taking into consideration the type of this study, comparative approach was involved because the study involves comparison of two works of art. Sociological approach was resorted to because literature cannot be disconnected from society and consists of people's life experience in society. Historical approach was worthy to this study as Ogundele (1992) posits that literature is more or less equated with history. Epics that were studied are said to include history in them too. As for the techniques, internal and external sources have been of a great relevance. Internal and external refer to primary and secondary sources as discussed earlier. Additionally, this is a literary study. As Professor Jenkins Rob contends in his *Literary Analysis as a Scientific Method*, the scientific method in literary studies broadly consists of three main steps such as observe, hypothesize, and experiment. The author agreed with him and resorted to his method for three steps are adequate in a literary study of this type. He explains that a poem or a work of art can be interpreted simply by applying the scientific method as defined above. The methodology here is justifiable in this sense. When we read a text, we must read it multiple times, read it slowly and carefully, constantly asking ourselves, questions about as what the writer is trying to mean. Too, any reader as a critic must pay special attention to any particular words, passages, or elements that seem especially significant or perplexing and ask him/her what they signify, how they fit in with the work as a whole. In so doing, we begin over time to come up with a theory of what the text might be about. The real work lies in experimenting, or testing the hypothesis. Now experiment starts at the top and test your hypothesis against what the poem or literary work actually says. Literary analysis, as such is an approach that the researcher deemed fit for this study.

The researcher used qualitative analysis to analyze the data. Quotations and passages were drawn from primary sources and were commented upon in a critical way. Quotations from primary sources were directly or indirectly supplemented by information from secondary sources. Data were analyzed based on Campbell's theory of the hero's journey as organized in a number of ways, mainly the departure, initiation and return. The researcher considers that departure involves the hero venturing forth the quest, initiation deals with hero's various adventures along the way, while return consists of the hero's triumphant returning home equipped with knowledge and powers already acquired on the journey.

ANALYSIS

In most cases, epic heroes experience exceptional birth often times preceded by prophecies. Their childhood is difficult and their youth as well. Ogundele (1992) says that epic heroes are rejected children and angry youths. Wars, and often times fight against dragon or monsters, is another feature for epic heroes. Special growth, invulnerability and superhuman power are other characteristics in this connection. Epic heroes are thus special and different from other stories protagonists. For

some epic heroes, exile is another important feature. At this point, heroes leave their fatherland together with their rejected mothers. Later, they return to claim their right, inheritance specifically. Epic heroes are also extraordinary figures whose exploits are highly ranked as they are driven by destiny that they cannot control themselves. Sundiata and Shaka fit most of these characteristics and may be comparable in a many ways.

Shaka and Sundiata compared

Frye Northrop's theory of characters model contends that "If a character is superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epic and tragedy ..." Sundiata and Shaka can be compared based on this theory besides Campbell's hero's journey that has guided the study so far. Basing on their heroic characteristics each, one can draw a line between them comparing and contrasting them. Both were born in unusual circumstances, a feature that makes them far different from other stories' protagonists. Sundiata's birth was marked by unusual incidents much as Shaka's birth was marked by supernatural events. Furthermore, both experienced a difficult childhood and bitter youth as well. Exile, is seen as the worst time on each side. Finally, fame and high rank due to wanders performance is another common feature between them. They reigned and extended their empires before they died.

As has already been pointed out, a hero's birth is exceptional. Sundiata and Shaka are both the subjects to this situation. In fact, Sundiata's birth is preceded by supernatural events and so is the birth of Shaka, son of Senzangakhona. Likewise, both heroes' births were prophesized by the diviners that they would be successors to their fathers each. As regard the childhood, Shaka and Sundiata do not differ. They experienced hard childhood as they were born from unwanted and hated mothers. Sundiata's mother was considerably hated by Sassouma who planned to kill them as she said: "I want to kill Sundiata. His destiny runs counter to my son's and he must be killed while there is still time". Nandi, Shaka's mother, was rejected by his husband Senzangakhona who did not want her at all to the extent that he even wanted to kill her son when he summoned to Mzoneli the official executioner: "Mzoneli, son of Mpikane, today you shall spill the royal blood. You shall kill my son, who is born of princess Nandi. Only this can bring peace to the land of the Zulus, never let this be known to any living female" (Kunene, 1979, p. 14).

Luckily, none of the two succumbed. Their journey had already started and they were under the guide of destiny. In line with Campbell's heroic journey, one can consider that they are at stage five, a level at which a hero crosses

the threshold at the end of act one. At this level the hero commits to leaving the ordinary world and entering a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values. Sundiata is welcomed at Mema and grew famous there. Shaka reached the village of Prince Mpukunyoni of the Mthethwas where he grew proud, generous and full of confidence. Further, it results in exile where Sundiata, on the one hand, and Shaka, on the other hand lived bitterly during their youth. Each of the two tasted the sweet and bitter of exile. They are then in a special world different from their home, with new condition, unfamiliar rules and new values. In exile, some people welcomed them while others saw them as a burden. Nevertheless, Sundiata's deeds in Mema on the one hand, and Shaka's in the Mtehtwa kingdom on the other hand, made them exceptional youth who were loved, feared but also respected.

The worst time of exile for Sundiata is the death of his mother in Mema when "In the morning, Sogolon Kedjou, the buffalo woman, passed away, and all the court of Mema went into mourning, for the viceroy's mother was dead" (Niane, 1965: 46). Unlikely, Shaka's mother died when he had already returned from exile to the Zulu land. Sundiata's important actions and events can also be compared to those of Shaka. In fact, both performed exploits beyond human power. Sundiata made a decision to walk after seven years crawling on all on his four. This is a great exploit. In connection with such an event, Sundiata went behind Niani, uprooted a giant baobab tree and brought it to his mother. Niane (1965) states,

The queen mother rushed there and when she saw Mari Djata standing up, she trembled...After recovering his breath he dropped the bar...his first step were those of a giant...Mother, here are some baobab leaves for you. From henceforth, it will be outside your hut that the women of Niani will come to stock up... (21-22).

Moreover, Sundiata fought and won many wars from Mema to Niani and even beyond. More importantly, his victory over Sosso and Soumaoro the sorcerer king is a very astounding action as Soumaoro had become a threat to the whole region. Sundiata's power defeated him and was praised for that.

Shaka's action resembles Sundiata's. First, Shaka killed a dangerous snake which attempted to attack him. Secondly, when a leopard attempted to attack his cattle, he killed it on the spot. As all young and old people had failed to kill it, Shaka won respect from them. Thirdly, Shaka performed the greatest deed when he killed the forest bandit, a "Mad Giant". For nobody could face that bandit, Shaka was now respected but also feared. Like Sundiata, too, Shaka fought and won many wars thanks to his personal tactics and organization. As regard their deaths, however, both died after they had already returned from exile. They died after they had done what had been waiting them for a long time. In sharp contrast

with the heroic deeds that characterized them; nothing heroic is not shown as regard their death. Sundiata is accounted to be either drowned or killed by an arrow. Thus his death brings confusion since there are two different accounts about it. However, Shaka's death is well defined. He was killed by his two brothers, Dingane and Mhlangana in collaboration with his paternal aunt. They killed him when he was alone without any guard or his spear. Actually, his death had been planned long before, and when Pampata warned him against that plan, he refused the advices. Sundiata and Shaka are finally comparable for their praise names. Each of the two was given the names that reflect his courage, heroism, and their extraordinary powers as well. While Sundiata was named the father of Mali, the lion of Mali, Shaka was named the fire whose fierce flames cannot be curbed, the sun of Zululand, the Great Mountain, the lion and many others. All these names converge to the same end that they are greater than other men.

Thus far, Sundiata and Shaka are more similar heroes than are different. They share exceptional birth, difficult childhood experience and bitter youth linked with their exploits beyond human power. Probably, one point makes a little difference between them. Much is not cleared about the death of Sundiata, while Shaka's death is well detailed.

Relevance of the epics of Sundiata and Shaka to African society

Literature involves people's experiences in the world and this is done through different literary genres. As one of these genres, the epic claims to have an important room in different literatures. Some people believe that literary critics analyze literature or the authors of literature to find truths about the world. Similarly, the study of African literature and African writers may reveal many things. An epic is a lengthy narrative poem, ordinarily concerning a serious subject containing details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation. Literary critics agree that Epic is multi-generic. As different genres have various functions, the point is that the more the genres the more the functions. In this regard, Mulokozi (2002) asserts that multifunctionality is a manifestation of varying socio-historical context and needs within which bards operate. He states that the same poem may have different functions for a different era, audience, class, and even individuals. Seydou, (1983) holds that the central function of epic is that of group mobilization and identification. The functions of epics, thus, include idealization which implies a didactic function, searching for a higher model and morality. Another is the social function. At this level, epic is seen as a model for relationship between clans, families and individuals. Patriotic function cannot be left out as epics enhance national unity. The last but not the least important function

of epic is historical in that epics are said to be chronicle of history. According to Deme (2012), Epics generally serve as living testimonies and reference of the acceptance by a given group of past traditional practices, is intended to transmit and reinforce such ideologies. To this, one can add Yarshater (1988) that epic poetry always has a close connection with a particular people for whom it has a profound meaning.

Patriotic function

Epics are characterized by heroic deeds. Similarly, Patriotism involves good and heroic deeds of a hero in favour of society in which he lives. Heywood (1977) points out that patriotism derives from a Latin word "patria" meaning "father land" and is a sentiment, a psychological attachment to one's nation. It is thus a 'love of one's nation'. Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic reflect patriotism. Sundiata had a strong love for his country much as Shaka the Great did. Each of them experienced the sweet and bitter life while in the exile but was still attached to their mother lands as they had vowed to come back each. "But I will return", added the son of Sogolon vehemently. I will return, do you hear? [...] 'I will return, do you hear me?' Djata went on and his tone was categorical" (Niane, 1965). In the same token, Shaka vowed: "I shall come back; I swear...I shall be wearing a blanket of flames...." Patriotism is also reflected in these words: "...By their sacrifice they have created for us a new world...they indeed died for us to make a better world, through their love they intervene on our behalf... we fight and die to protect our children" Kunene (1979: 19).

Having sojourned from place to place, Sundiata and Shaka could not stand spending their whole lives beyond their fatherlands. Strong love for their countries, in connection with destiny, was pushing them to accomplish their mission each as it had been foretold. As one's country is a good legacy from his/her forefathers, nobody except death would deprive Sundiata and Shaka to come back to lay claim over their fatherlands. They were thus patriots led by destiny. Additionally, patriotism involves sacrifice or death for the sake of one's nation, for others to survive. As Kunene (1979) says that a nation survives through the sacrifice of its children, Sundiata and Shaka fit this saying and many other Generals in their armies are no exception. Not everybody can deny themselves for others to survive. It is a special determination which requires exceptional courage and devotion as shown below that:

Through all the great heroes of Zululand, So long as there is the sun, So long shall the tale of our fearlessness, I praise those who are ready to die with me in a battle, Together we have built an eternal mountain, It is to all the heroes I owe this honour, I praise heroes of the

courage....(243).

The above words as addressed by Shaka to Mgobhozi in Kunene (1979) convey the message that there is no patriotism among those who are afraid to die for others. Rather, a patriot should be fearless to die and save others as Kunene (op.cit) puts it this way:

I shall be glad to die in a battlefield; I shall rejoice to die for the national that I love By its power I was nourished from its beginning until I grew tall, Today no one dress to challenge us; I have seen our land becoming the home of many heroes and nations (285).

From the above words, patriotism is by far reflected. One can learn that patriots build their countries firmly and later become stronger fighters who are able to protect their countries. In the same vein, Sundiata manifested his courage and never feared to return home. Though his army was a small number he was confident to resist his adversary in these words:

No matter how small a forest may be, you can always find there sufficient fibers to tie up a man. Numbers mean nothing; it is worth that count [...]. I think I shall clear myself a path to Mali [...] no mere infantrymen can halt my course towards Mali (Niane, 1965: 48).

The above words reflect the extent to which Sundiata was fearless and committed to returning to Mali his fatherland to save his people. The latter stands that Sundiata would put an end to their sufferings as they sang:A new sun rose in the East....A man came to us. He had heard our groans and come to our aid, like a father when he sees his son in tears (Kunene, 1975: 74). Sundiata is a patriot in that, led by destiny [cfr."Your destiny lies not here but in Mali (Niane, 1965: 38)], the attachment to his fatherland pushed him to leave exile.

Didactic function

Didactic function here refers to educational mirror. Johnson et al. (1997) say that [oral] epics from Africa are pedagogical tools that offer textual support for a growing popular recognition of African epic poetry and its heroes. From heroic narratives, much can be learnt about people and the world around them. Epics are good teachers. One may learn how young generations benefit from their forefathers. Fight for one's right, justice and heroism are other important lessons that can be learnt through the stories of Shaka and Sundiata. How one can behave in hard situation of sufferings is another point that is mirrored throughout epics under study. Traditional organization is another point which goes with historical function as we shall see it later. In other words, Sundiata and Shaka are means through which society can learn

how to handle many of life issues. One can learn how the burden of a ruler never ends and how a good leader should be exemplary as (Kunene, 1979: 40) posits that “a follower must perform as well as his master and that the rulers are the fountains from which a nation drinks.” Sundiata’s story, similarly, teaches much about good leadership and justice as well (Niane, 1965: 81) says it that:

Djata’s justice spared nobody. He followed the very word of God. He protected the weak against the strong and people would make journeys lasting several days to come and demand justice of him. Under his sun, the upright man was rewarded and the wicked one punished.

Sundiata and Shaka are also didactic in that they may teach society change. Both can encourage people to ape good deeds. Kunene (1979) puts it that “no man shall merit from the heroism of others and it is only by courage that the power of command can be achieved. The same author calls and encourages people to fight their enemy when he says: “to die running from enemies is a curse every hero fears.” According to Niane, too, “Sundiata left his mark on Mali for all time and his taboos are still guiding men in their conduct” meaning that he gave a good example that is still relevant to Mandingoes and many others.

Historical function

Durosimi et al. (1992) say that Literature is the sum- total of history and culture and epic is part and parcel of the field of literature. The relevance of epics to society, thus, cannot leave out history. In fact, history involves society in that the former deals with past events of man in the world around him. In other words, history is about society and is directed to society. Yarshaster (1988) converges with the point made here. He said that epics embody the values of people, history and ideals and can formulate people’s cultural and spiritual heritage. As the protagonists in epics are often time historical figures, the idea that epic is a vehicle of history can be justified. Both Sundiata and Shaka are historical heroes. Sundiata is by far known in the history of Mali Empire much as Shaka is an important personality in the history of South Africa. Niane (1965:1) explains clearly as regard this function:

I teach the Kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old but the future springs from the past. My word is pure and free from untruth.

Furthermore, wars and history are two meeting elements. Many history subjects include tribal or civil wars, regional or world wars. They may be about conquest or empire expansion. Sundiata and Shaka match this point. From

each of the two epics, one may know about the great warriors, brave and triumphant men and empire builders. For instance, one can know that Shaka was a consummate leader. His rule extended over a large part of Southern Africa. Areas that were not under his direct rule were under his protection. Not only was he a great military genius, but his varied gifts demonstrated qualities of organization and innovation that were unique (Kunene, 1979). Similarly, during the reign of Sundiata, the world knew happiness. People in his time could go from village to village without fearing brigands. The narrative reveals how Mema was the town of hospitality and that Wagadou was the town in which the descendents of Alexander the Great used to reign (Niane, 1965: 82-83). Sundiata epic can also reveal Mandingoes and their neighbours the victory of Sundiata over Soumaoro Kanté, a sorcerer king who had been invincible for years, and who had threatened the whole region. Kings and their kingdoms, too, may be known especially how Mali Empire was founded. Similarly, Shaka epic chronicles the history of the arrival or settlement of the Whites in South Africa during Shaka’s reign as Kunene (1979) puts it that:

For the first time Shaka officially meets a delegation of white traders. Shaka sees them from a very realistic angle. He studies their habits and weapons, seeing them as desperate but still human species. After an assassination attempt on him, they ask to tend his wounds and immediately used this occasion to ask for land. He gives them land which for him will also serves as a settlement from which to study them. He intends that whatever he learns of them and from them must strengthen his army. He also wishes for an agreement with King George that will define their sphere of influence. Accordingly he sends a delegation.

Shaka’s genius was not only limited to internal affairs but also he had a keen interest in foreign affairs. Of course, this is history of his reign. History also takes oral sources into consideration. The role of epics at this level can also be cleared. Kesteloot (1971) believed that history depends largely on oral sources before being put into writing and so do epics as they are handed down retold from generation to generation. Niane (1965) asserts that Sundiata epic is a fruit of an obscure griot who occupies the chair of history and adds that Griots know the history of Kings and kingdoms; that’s why they are the best counselors of the Kings [...], depositories of the knowledge of the past and are known as guardians of culture, history and royal secrets. Niane (1965) stands that,

In the very hierarchical society of Africa, before colonization, where everyone found his place, the griot appears as one of the most important of this society, because it is he who, for want of archives, records the customs, traditions and governmental principles of

Kings... (iii)

Durosimi et al. (1992) say that Kunene presents a historically realistic view of Shaka and outlined his life. It is really a historic but not fictional character. History also reveals that Sundiata existed. There are many accounts for that one being the presence of his tomb near the Sankarani. All in all, Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic are historical literary works.

Socio- cultural function

As pointed out earlier, literature cannot be disconnected from society. Literature is a social fact of society in that it is a product of society and produces society. Put another way, literature involves people's life and the community in which they live. African heroic Epics are concerned with social and cultural functions and represent one of the most comprehensive surveys of African customs and values (Johnson, 1997). These multi-generic narratives provide keen insight into the moral systems of African societies, and reflect the richness and complexity of their cultures. Folklorist Daniel P. Biebuyck (1978) calls the Nyanga epics, for example, "cultural monuments, providing a rich perspective on the wealth and diversity of Nyanga culture". Rummell (2002) calls epics "cultural monuments," and says that they preserve and celebrate cultural values and customs. She adds that the epics serve to unify the listening community by reminding them of the value of their culture. Biebuyck (1978) holds that "the epics create in the listeners' minds a sense of belonging, a feeling of greatness and pride". Epics gather the community and tell its stories all the while nourishing and honoring cultural values and behaviours. The same author views epics as the vehicles, for the most part, of African cultures value harmony, restraint, and community. Furthermore, Biebuyck and Mateene (1969) argue that the values are the main themes in the African epic tradition. As regard Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic, the social and cultural function is inevitable. Both epics centre on royal issues. They also reflect the extent to which society is paved with social conflicts. In Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali the conflict is related to jealousy and hatred between co-wives and step brothers. The root of the conflict is power where Sassouma decides to kill Sogolon in a great secrecy. In Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic, the conflict takes place between a husband and his second wife. In both stories, the hated mothers are driven away from their husbands' kingdoms. They wander from kingdom to kingdom, together with their sons, in search of exile. Yet, it has been foretold that they would succeed to their fathers each. Sundiata would succeed to his father Nare Maghan while Shaka would succeed to Senzangakhona. From this situation, one can learn the

African traditional culture of succession of a father by his son as inheritance. The culture of bread- and- butter, too, can be conveyed throughout the two heroic stories. Niane (1965: 29) puts it this way:

Everywhere the stranger enjoys the right to hospitality. So Sogolon and his children were received and lodged in the enclosure of the King Mansa Konkon at Djedeba, a town on the Niger two days away from Niani.

After two months of hospitality, they left Djedeba and took the path to exile. They went away to seek hospitality from the King of Tabon (in the country called Fouta Djallon at time when Niane wrote this book) who kindly welcomed Sogolon while Nandi (Shakka's mother) took a long and hazardous journey to seek asylum among their cousins, the Quabes. On their long way, where they asked for a place to sleep, they were quietly and kindly led to a sleeping house, and fed well. To put it clearly, Father Ngazama consoled Nandi by saying: "My whole village is your dwelling place, all its gates are open to receive you and your relatives, be happy with us [...]" Nandi and her children were then welcomed among the Quabes and King Khondlo opened his heart to them ordering his relative Prince Gendeyana to give them a home" (Kunene, 1965:43).

The African society should learn from that situation and feel sorry while thanking people, who welcome the rejected human creatures, Sogolon and her children on the one hand, and Nandi and hers on the other hand. Through Sundiata and Shaka's stories, thus, African society can think of this value and copy the culture of offering hospitality to the strangers in hard situations. In most of African societies, too, hatred may make a human being chase away his fellow, no matter what would happen to the latter. This situation is what is seen in Sundiata and Shaka epics. Such a situation is relevant to society in that some may feel sympathetic and blame the ills done to those innocent mothers and their children. This is a bad culture to be banned among people. It must be pointed out that Sundiata and her mother were chased away due to the jealousy of the co-wives Sassouma Bereté. They escaped from her wicked plan which would end the life of the future heir as prophesied by the diviners. In some African societies, co-wives create hatred and jealousy one another, each having a thirsty of winning the husband. At this level, the message conveyed through these two epics can help African society ban this bad culture among co-wives. Apart from jealousy among co-wives people may feel jealous of their neighbours fame, popularity, or achievements. This is what happened to Sundiata and Shaka in exile among their peers. Sundiata grew up popular, well reputed and achieved high deeds. Shaka did so. As Sundiata and Shaka's peers failed to equal them, they felt jealous towards those men of tremendous wanders; extraordinary heroes led by destiny each. This situation is very

important to African society in that, if not banned, such bad culture may result in serious effects that may lead to destruction.

Unlikely, friendship as conveyed through these epics can be encouraged among Africans. In fact, Sundiata and Shaka had few enemies but many friends. Dindiswayo was very kind and very helpful to Shaka much as Sundiata benefited a lot from the help of Moussa Tounkara. Any society should take it as a weapon to have a friend who would come for help or rescue in case of serious problems. It is in line with the common social saying that "A friend in need is a friend indeed". Praise names are another important point to be raised as regard the cultural relevance of African heroic epics. In both Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic, there are many praise names which describe the heroic achievements and outstanding behaviour in society. For example, "it is common in Zulu society to have both one's real name and a praise name or names. Shaka is referred to as Nodumhlezi, one whose fame spreads while he sits unshaken, i.e. invincible". Mlilwana (meaning a restless fire) is another praise name given to Shaka by her mother in her early youth to describe her aggressive temper. In the same vein, Sundiata was called Lion of Mali, the father of the Bright Country, the Master of a hundred vanquished kings, the ancestor of those who draw the bow, and many others (Niane, 1965: 2).

Conclusion

Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali and Emperor Shaka the Great, A Zulu Epic are didactic at different level. They teach history. People may know through them how the future springs from the past. They also convey the message of patriotism and heroism by teaching sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of others. By the two epics, too, one may know about society, how some people act against their fellow human beings while others are there to help the rejected human creatures. Suffice it here to say that Sundiata and Shaka epics are good teachers. Epic is an important folklore genre that transmits knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. Thus, The primary purpose of this study was to explore two African epic literary genres and have a look at the theme of heroism as reflected in Niane's Sundiata , an Epic of Old Mali and in Kunene's Shaka the Great, a Zulu Epic. The major findings are that epic heroes are characters whose deeds are a blend of both human and superhuman actions.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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