Thomas Mofolo's Chaka: an Epic Hero or a Villain?

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December 20th, 2012

Introduction

The literary hero (in) is usually defined as the main character of a novel, a poem or a tragedy. S/he generally distinguishes her/himself by her/his virtues or extraordinary deeds (Petit Robert: 506).[1] This conception of the hero informs the "horizon of expectation" (Jauss: 50-56, 74) of most readers who expect to share with the narrator and hero (in) these extraordinary deeds when they read a literary production. For Ralph Emerson, "the heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic". (149) They expect to identify a character endowed with qualities and virtues that can inspire them as ordinary human beings. These virtues and qualities the writer endows his/her characters with are the device used to enlist empathy for the hero.

This paper rather questions this conception of the hero. The question as to whether Chaka is a hero or a villain raises a semantic concern about what this notion refers to. It implies that there is no easy and clear-cut consensus building definition among critics. Can a character be considered a hero by some readers and a villain by some others? Who decides in the first place if a character is a hero or a villain? Are there specific traits to delineate a hero according to the literary genre? When applied to Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka,* the eponymous novel of the Sotho born writer which has inspired so many other writers later, these general questions will allow us to analyze the concept of hero in the history of literature. The focus will be on the aspects that are generally agreed on as attributes of the epic hero which most critics claim Chaka is. Ultimately, this study will analyze some novelistic traits that make of Chaka an uneasy case for a consensual definition of the epic hero.

I- Literature and Heroic Characters

The history of storytelling and literature has always revealed the presence of heroes in stories. They seem to be a prerequisite for stories as fiction and even histories to exist. They have been present in all forms of literature of all times. Here and there heroic deeds therefore seem to constitute the essence of literature.

In ancient times (of all regions of the world), heroes appeared in all shapes and forms. Some heroes were divinities among whom one of the best known is Prometheus. Some came in the shape of animals as is the case in many African folktales. The oldest forms of literature being religious, the heroes were divine beings that evolved from divinities to human heroes or historical figures. Plain human or historical heroes seem to be a later development from this inhuman nature of heroism in myths, legends and fictions. This anthropomorphic degeneration from a divine to a human stature of heroism explains a long standing conception of the hero as an extraordinary character endowed with superhuman qualities.

Although it is ever-present in the history of literary production, the nature of literary heroism remains epistemological. The main difference between *homo sapiens* and *homo fictus* is that the former is born whereas the second is created. (Bar: 1) The character of fiction therefore has no secrets about itself for its creator while a human being will remain a secret not only to others but also to her/himself. Some of her/his minor motives will remain in a

[1] The term hero will refer here to both male and female as is the case in any culture. The dominating trend in epic literature is the male hero because of the patriarchal ideology prevailing in most epic narratives.

darkroom. The same goes for historical figures as far as the historian is concerned. As a creation, the *homo fictus* is not made for itself as a character. It has a social function. Heroes in myths, legends and fictions are vested with social values. They generally represent cultural norms, ideas and values of the communities of their communities. They stand for some historical events, the trials and social matrixes of the people who brought them into being. They may also be intended to embody new values thereby questioning older ones. Literature being sometimes considered as anticipating its time, as initiating new values, this is possible through the creation of heroes who defend values to be accepted in the long run. Ezra Pound thus regards literature as the "antenna of the race" when Marshall Mc Luhan describes it as a "radar" of sorts, a system of long distance detection that allows to detect psychological and social phenomena very early so as to be able to face them (Luhan:16).

Heroes are therefore more than characters. They represent something beyond the mere creations they are. Epic heroism, for instance, seems to develop out of the need for a savior, for gifted beings to embody the hopes of their communities. They are composed to display exceptional deeds, physical prowess against real and imaginary adversities. In other contexts and times, a different type of heroism emerges. In the modernist era which celebrates the individual as the living embodiment of rationality itself as opposed to collective thinking and belief systems, all values seemed to be centered on the individual hero. This bourgeois triumphant individual produced a literature with an exceptional hero who, if unable to accomplish supernatural deeds, could receive the sympathy of readers for the values he stood for. Against villains, crooks, thieves and what not, such a hero was on the positive side of values and a bond of sympathy developed between him and the readership. The underside of such a hero reflects the readers' own. As well, the weaker the hero, the more human he appears to the readers.

In a new "age of suspicion" (in reference to the title of N. Sarraute's essay: 1990) about rationality and the triumphant bourgeois individualism as a consequence of the disastrous influence of science and technique (products of rationality) during the successive wars and equally disastrous ideologies (capitalism, Nazism, Stalinism, etc,) that justified them, the exceptional individual hero began to be questioned. No social consensus could be reached on the very values and ideas that heroism had to embody. In postmodern literature, it has become even more difficult to define the hero or even argue if literature needs heroism in the first place. For the propounders of French Nouveau Roman, for instance, it has become simply impossible to put characters at the heart of the novel. These theorists dismiss the hero or characters in any stories as antiquities forced into a new context. (Alain Robbe-Grillet, chapter 3: On several obsolete notions 25 - 48) If in postcolonial literatures characters still appear in fiction, there is a new type of heroes now after such celebrated legendary figures in oral traditions like Sunjata, Abla Pokou, Maghan yan, Famori, Siramori, and others. Heroes like Samba Diallo (C.H. Kane), The Man, Teacher, Baako, (Armah 1966, 1969), Fama (Kourouma), Saif (Ouologuem) … have often been presented as conveying pessimism instead of optimism as the traditional hero generally does. Having no clear message with a consistent ideology to deliver, these heroes are loners or rebels who are no articulate spokespersons.

The hero does not stand all alone with intrinsic values. He does not have values that are immanent. Instead, he is a creation vested with author's intentions as well as the readers' sympathies. Readers decide in the last instance who is a hero and who is not. Stephanie S. Halldorson aptly sums up this observation as follows:

> The readers and the heroic character are equal in their creation of the hero: no reader, no hero.
> Stories are written because the reader demands them, wants them, needs them. Even if the hero dies over and over again, and even if the author cannot bring the hero back

> with a shining key to fix the ills of society, the reader is desperate to engage in the journey. The reader has an impulse to the heroic (to help create the world) but does not have the ability to do so and, therefore, needs a hero to do it for them. This need drives the reader. Any available story will be looked at for its heroic potential: (xi)

This implies that a character can be a hero for one group and be a villain at the same time or in another era for another group. There is even a situation where the character designed to be a hero by the author turns out to be considered a villain by the readers. This shows the ambivalent and ideologically-loaded notion of heroism. Chaka is one such ambivalent hero whose traits are rather conspicuous.

II- Chaka as an Epic Hero

If there is no systematic and consensual definition of the hero in general and the epic hero in particular, there are nevertheless general criteria that most epic characters share. There is the extraordinary birth and life of the hero, his social ascendancy, his supernatural deeds and his symbolic social function. These qualities and attributes are shared in many cultures at different times in human history. The stories of Achilles, Samson and David, Electra, Heracles, Roland, Gilgamesh, Sunjata, Silamaka, Mwido , etc all share these motifs. The question now is: can we put Chaka on the same shelf as these established epic figures?

1- The Extraordinary Childhood

If Chaka's very birth does not cause any cosmic upheaval as is often the case in most epic, he is born in a context worth recalling. After many unsuccessful attempts by king Senzangakhona to have a male child to inherit the throne, the king has the good fortune to have one in Chaka with Nandi. The events surrounding the child's growth are not merely ordinary. As a baby, Chaka is marked out as a child outside all norms. The words uttered when he is born are full of enigma, omen and prophecies. They reveal the prophetic nature of the child. The narrator's words capture what is at stake: they foretell "great events":

> When the messenger came to Senzangakona he said, 'there has been born to you a boy, an ox of the vultures', and indeed there never was a child for whom these words were more fitting. He was a male child, and he was also an ox of the vulture, as the reader will see afterwards. (6)

The witch-doctor of Bungane predicts extraordinary events in the child's life by listening to the message of his vein: "[t]he events which will take place around the life of this child are of great importance; they are weighty matters." (14) Out of narrative economy, these ominous words and what they imply are left for later developments of the story. This therefore awakens the reader's curiosity and makes them impatient. Yet there is no doubt about the extraordinary things to happen in the boy's life.

Chaka is no ordinary child. He is different from all the other children. He seldom cries as do most children his age. He stoically endures pain and never runs away when he is beaten. He even never pleads for mercy thereby rejecting all "normal attitudes" one would expect from any child and call "cowardice":

> Even when he was chastized he did not often cry or he might cry only once and then keep quiet. Children generally squall when they are given a beating, and they beg for mercy, at the same time telling how repentant they are; or else they run away. All

those were things which Chaka never did. He said that pleading for mercy gave satisfaction to the inflictor of the punishment. As for running away, he said that that was cowardice for when a person is chastized for a wrong he has committed, he must endure the punishment that arises from his wrong doing.(7)

What is more, Chaka behaves in a way that shows his royal ascendancy, which is another important trait of the epic hero. Chaka is no common person and the advantage of birth sets him above the rank and file. By his very personality as early as childhood, nobody fails to see his special stature:

> Those who knew him [Chaka] as a child told how, even as he played with other children, any person whose eyes met his, even without having known him before, could tell at once that he was a royal blood, and not the child of a commoner.(8)

Chaka is not as highly privileged as some epic characters. He is not the child of any divinity like Achilles who is son to King Peleus and goddess Thetis, a sea nymph. He is not a god like Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk who is two-thirds god and one-third man. The Zulu hero's mother is Nandi, a mere human being unlike Sogolon, Sunjata's mother who is a "buffalo woman" from whom the Manding epic hero draws all the mystic forces of the woman's totemic personality. He is neither Sumanguru who was born to a human mother but to a spirit father according to various versions. (Niane; Innes; Camara (Kambili vol.1), etc) But these legendary figures have no epic traits more than Chaka. If the latter is not conceived by divine figures, he is later chosen as the favorite of the spiritual beings of his community at the ritual bath where he is visited by "*the King of the Deep Pool''* (Chapter four). His father is the ruler of what would become later the Mazulu nation. Nandi, the hero's mother, is a princess, the daughter of Prince Bhebhe a local chief from the Langeni Tribe. From this social background one may submit that Chaka shares with most epic characters all over the world a privileged ascendancy that sets him above the rank and file of his community. Born to mere human beings, he is more human than many other epic heroes. This, however, in no way disqualifies him as an epic hero. More than this royal ascendancy, it is through his extraordinary deeds that proves his epic heroism.

2- The Motif of Magic or the Extraordinary Deeds of the Hero.

Chaka's life, like that of epic heroes in various cultures is not ordinary. It combines with magic and other supernatural events unachievable by ordinary human beings. In addition to prophesies that foretell the extraordinary nature of his life before he matures, Chaka performs feats of daring. Very early as a child he is initiated into witchcraft. He is vaccinated with potent medicines to turn into a fierce and fearless person who longs for fighting. All these medicines transform the "lovable" and "bouncing" infant into a fearless and violent boy. The victim he once has been becomes the tormentor of his age mates. The qualitative change he undergoes is summed up by the beast-like nature he develops into after using the witch woman's powerful medicines.

> From that day on, Chaka had an uncontrollable desire to fight, and it had to be a serious fight in which heavy sticks and spears were used. He dreamt about it at night when he was sleeping; he dreamt about it during the day, with his eyes open; […] Always at the end of a fight he would feel a sense of happiness, and experience a wonderful feeling of relaxation, like a poisonous snake which, after biting a person lies sick until that person dies,…(14 - 15)

As a young uncircumcised lad, Chaka carries out extraordinary deeds. At an age when his age mates still hang on to their mothers' apron strings, Chaka, with a mere cutlass, kills a lion that causes adult males to run away out of fear. He also kills a hyena that had earlier created havoc and suffering among his people. His first feat of daring in Bokone, Dingiswayo's kingdom, is to kill a madman in the forest near the cliffs of the Mfolozi River. Even the brave men of Bokone run away when they hear about the madman who causes damage among cattle, laming and killing the brave persons who dare chase him.

Chaka also shows his heroic supernatural stature by his exploits in the battle of Zwide. When he is about to be killed in the battle, the calling of Isanusi's name causes a miracle that proves instrumental in the victory against Zwide's men and reveals Chaka as a hero with acknowledged extraordinary qualities. The motif of magic plays an important role in a scene of a battle (54) to save Chaka and ensure his victory over the enemy. Chaka wants to snatch back his shield that has been taken out of him by one of Zwide's men. To lose one's shield is regarded as a disgrace by Chaka who, by calling Isanusi's name, can experience the mystical powers of his master in witchcraft:

> For this reason Chaka once more shouted: 'Isanusi!' Whereupon that young man from Zwide's stumbled and was thrown forward, and he even somersaulted as he fell. When he tried to get up he fell down again and even stepped on his neck (54)

Other supernatural deeds are associated with Chaka. He does not always use a spear to kill those he wishes to see dead. Since he did not want to have any child, his mother Nandi abducts one of his women who becomes pregnant. She hides the latter until she gives birth. When Chaka hears about this child, Nandi denies the child is Chaka's. He gets so infuriated and orders the child be brought before him to check if it is his. The scene is worth quoting for its magical flavor:

> [Chaka] asked [Nandi] to put [the child] in the center of the courtyard, and then he came close to the child so that his shadow fell on him, and as soon as this happened that child died immediately. That was how Chaka knew the children he had fathered (150)

At the end of the story, Chaka is no more the powerful hero he once was. Yet, he remains a man endowed with extraordinary powers that are beyond humans' reach as is the case when he can kill a person by simply raising his hand as if to strike without actually doing it:

> He stood up unsteady on his feet, yet so fearsome that whenever he as much as raised his hand as if to strike someone, that person died at once with his mouth open just like the beak of a bird. (164-165)

Chaka therefore shares with most established epic heroes the motif of magic and superlative actions. It is pointless trying to prove that these things actually happened. The unusual world of these heroes reflects the aspirations and dreams of the society which the narrator shares with members of the community. Moreover, in the context of oral traditions where people rely on fragile human memorizing, hyperbolic imagery becomes a mnemotechnic device, a "noetic role" not only for the community for its recalling of main historical events (Ong:70) but also for the performer who is expected to tell the story without losing its main threads. Yet the narrative does not become a world of fantasy disconnected

with the everyday life. The "superlative exists side by side with the mundane" argues the Nigerian thinker Okpewho (1979: 228) who thus shows the sense of realism common to most traditional narratives. The epic world is partly history partly legend, partly facts and partly narrative creation. As such, the hero becomes a vessel through which social values, aspirations and symbols are presented.

3. Heroism and the Symbolic function.

Heroes in general and epic heroes in particular are more than characters. Myths and symbols are perpetuated through their exceptional deeds and destinies. They crystallize the aspirations of members of the community and inspire actions. Chaka is a symbol not only for the Zulus but for many other communities with which the Zulu hero never had any contact. Many literary works have been published on the hero thus confirming this symbolic function. No African hero can claim to have inspired fiction more than Chaka. Sunjata is a well known Manding epic hero; however, he remains popular in the lands where his exploits were recorded, i.e, West Africa, in the Manding zone. Chaka is not a South African hero; he is simply an African hero, better still, a Black hero. He inspired Senegalese poet president Leopold Sedar Senghor for his collection of poems entitled *Ethiopiques and published* in1956. In 1961 the Malian Seydou Badian published the play *La mort de Chaka*. In 1970 the Guinean Condetto Nénékhaly Camara published another play entitled *Amazoulou*. Even Djibril Tamsir Niane felt the need to have his version of Chaka in 1971 after his renowned *Sunjata.* The Senegalese Abdou Anta Kà wrote a play, *Les Amazoulous* in 1972 and the Congolese also wrote a play, *Le Zulu*, in 1977. From the Zambian F.M. Mulikita (*Shaka zulu*) to many Zulu writers like novelist John L. Dube, R.R.R. Dhlomo in the thirties and poets Oswald Mtsheli and Mezisi Kunene in the 1970s, all have used the Zulu hero as a theme for their inspiration. (Gérard : 1984)

In a context of cultural denigration as a consequence of the ill effects of colonization and racism, Chaka seems to have served as a symbol of Africa's cultural Renaissance to these artists. He seems to have been regarded as the symbol of the power and pride these artists and their people missed so much. It is revealing that in the context of colonization and neocolonization, Chaka who is described by Mofolo's narrator as a "blood-crazed monster of evil" (Bodunde: 20) becomes the symbol of the unity of the black Race in the works of other postcolonial writers and intellectuals. In their works, he is often presented as a model that can inspire African resistance and unification, a pioneer of the Pan African ideal. Chaka, indeed, was able to unite various tribes of the region into a powerful empire that could resist any adversity. He was able to turn the small scattered community of Nguniland into the powerful nation of Zululand. These various writers have certainly not conveyed one single picture of the hero. Each of them focuses on one aspect of the hero they deem worthy of attention. Some like Mofolo have portrayed a negative picture of the hero while others drew a positive picture (M. Kunene.) It must be born in mind that some tribes of the South African region suffered from Chaka's expansionist goals. The Sotho, Mofolo's community, remember Chaka's era as a dark spot in their history. For them Chaka has always been a blood thirsty tyrant, a certain "Clovis", "Attila" who for twenty years spread terror and desolation on their land. Albert Gérard argues that Mofolo is to Chaka what Tolstoy was to Bonaparte before adding insights to the negative attitude of the Sotho writer to the Zulu hero:

> Il n'est pas plus concevable qu'un romancier Sotho fasse de Chaka un héro positif, qu'on ne peut imaginer un romancier français exaltant Bismarck, Guillaume II ou Hitler. Lorsque des savants compétents c'est-à-dire possédant la langue Sotho et pratiquant les méthodes de la science littéraire moderne – Comparant l'image de

> Chaka telle qu'elle ressort vraisemblablement des poèmes qui constituent la tradition orale du peuple Sotho, avec celle qu'en propose Mofolo, on constatera sans doute que l'écrivain partageait l'opinion de base de ses compatriotes. (Gérard: 13)

Whatever the picture or the theme focused on, Chaka is no ordinary character. He is too rich a character to be represented by the stroke of a pen on which all writers and scientists would agree. His very ability to raise discussions and sometime controversies is the very nature of the extraordinary personality he shares with characters like Napoleon, Bismarck, William II, Sunjata or Sumanguru. In addition to this potential for inspiring imaginations, Chaka embodies the deep lying features of the tradition of his people.

One of the very ancient traditions that is revisited through Chaka's story is the growth of the hero from an innocent weak child to a strong fearless and ferocious boy. This motif of epic narratives could be a degenerated reminiscence of ancient ritual miraculous reincarnations. This period of weaknesses symbolizes the period of the character's life before his ritual initiation when he is still a socially inferior being. (Misiugin &Vydrin: 103) Chaka's forced exile is in line with the initiation rite of isolation of youngsters from the rest of the community. During this exile, he acquires the arms to come back victorious. This exile is a lesson of patience to the future ruler who must learn to bide his time. He must not force upon his destiny which is ordained. This motif is also reminiscent of that tradition which has it that there are no two rulers for one land. The one defeated must leave. The protagonist's return from exile is a home-coming of the chief who had been defeated to his former territory (Misiugin & Vydrin: 104)

Another motif that Chaka's story conveys is the etiological invariant. Human communities must find an origin to their social practices. They usually use a fixed point in history to which they attach these values. Mythic and legendary figures ideally serve that anthropological concern. They crystallize social practices by their "heavy figures" (Ong: 70) and materialize or substantiate ideas or social practices that might otherwise remain abstract concepts. Chaka like most epic figures is made to play such a role. Everything of worth in the Zulu people's history is traced back to him. He was the initiator of all traditions. Chaka found a name for his people. Before the advent of his reign, his nation had an ugly and disgraceful name. The name "Zulu! Mazulu" conveys the pride, greatness, glory, and beauty of this people (Chaka: 103). Chaka taught his people not only how to sing and dance, but he also initiated most of their traditional rules. He initiated a new architecture for his royal city. He taught them new strategies of war. He abolished some traditions like circumcision and marriage for soldiers. He taught them how to honor and praise their ruler he was. Through the stylistic device of repetition, the narrator shows that Chaka is a sort of Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of everything for the Zulus:

> He taught them fighting strategies: how to attack, retreat and then suddenly renew the assault; he taught them how to dance smartly… He taught them some beautiful war game… Above all he taught them obedience …He also composed many beautiful songs and praises, which made the warriors weep when they heard them, for they roused in them strange emotions (112)

Chaka is therefore a civilizing hero who brought unknown values to his people. Against the praising tradition, the narrator traces cannibalism in Africa to Chaka's expansionist conquest known as difaqane:

> It was at that time that on account of hunger, people began to eat each other as one eat the flesh of a slaughtered animal; they hunted each other like animals and ate each

other; They started because of hunger, but afterwards continued with their cannibalism out of habit. The first cannibal was a Zulu called Ndadva, who lived near the place where the city of Durban now stands. (137)

Like Prometheus who is believed to have brought civilization to humans according to Greek mythology or Sunjata who set most of social rules at Kouroukan Fouga in the Manding society (Niane : 2010), Chaka initiates most of traditional values that characterize the Zulu people. He is therefore an epic hero who shares with other epic heroes the quality of being the living embodiment of social values of their communities. If he shares so many features with other established epic heroes, Chaka remains a controversial hero for some critics and writers for whom he cannot be a hero in the true sense of the word.

III- Chaka as an Anti-Hero or a Villain

Is there anything like an anti-hero? This would imply that there is a fixed structure for delineating a heroic character that writers must follow and which readers must identify and acknowledge. A hero must therefore embody a set of ideas, values that readers and writers would agree on. This obviously is not the frame in which heroic narratives are built. That is why each culture seems to have its heroic features or each writer may have his set of heroes. Critics have carried out studies on the "American hero." Others have devoted energies and talent to deciphering the structure of the Hemingway's hero. Among these, we have Halldorson (2007), Ian Campbell (1982), Joseph Campbell (1973), Carlyle (1993) to quote the few.

A definition of the hero as a character or as a set of actions is incomplete as long as it does not take into account the reader who hears or reads the story. Character and action must be solidified in the narrative read and incorporated into the reader's belief system. (Halldorson:5) That is why there can still persist discussion on the heroic identity of some characters. Some characters in a narrative can be considered as heroes in some circles and simply dismissed as "non-heroes", "anti-heroes" or plain villains in some others. Thomas Mofolo's narrative is no simple story that can easily be labeled as a heroic narrative. I have underscored some general patterns of the heroic narrative. Some others exist in Mofolo's portraying of Chaka which lead critics to question the heroic stature of the main character of the novel.

1 - Chaka's Story as a Demystifying Process.

Epic narratives are centered on epic heroes who embody their communities' myths that they must fulfill. Some of the myths that inspire modern African literature are unity, freedom and the retrieval of a mythic past glory. These modern myths are to be understood against the background of the long night of humiliation and suffering caused by successive foreign dominations. Epic heroes of oral traditions like Lianja of the Mongo, Mwindo of the BaNyanga, Jeki of the Duala, the Ozidi Saga of the Ijo, to name a few, are resurrected in postcolonial literature to serve that redeeming purpose. Mwindo, for example, shows a great concern for social harmony and accord when the invincible Kambili represents "hope" and salvation for his community. Many writers after Mofolo have continued that tradition by using historical and legendary figures as a symbol for Africa's redemption. Among these intellectuals and artists are Leopold Senghor, Seydou Badian, M. Kunene, D.T. Niane. For these artists, the Zulu hero is analyzed as the living embodiment of negritude ideas, pan African ideals and longing for pride, dignity and freedom.

Mofolo's book, however, does not always follow that line. It rather appears to readers as a demystifying process. Chaka is not the hero most African readers would have liked Mofolo to depict in times when such figures were needed. The longing for redemptive heroes is very often frustrated in several sequences of the narrative.

Chaka is not the positive figure who unites African peoples against a common foreign enmity. He is rather a blood thirsty leader perpetrating crass and gratuitous violence against his own people. He sets tribes against tribes (135-136), plays off one regiment against another of his own army, kills on no reasonable grounds. After a long description of a series of killings by Chaka, the narrator sums up the unscrupulous manipulative ability of Chaka who "killed Zulu by Zulu without them being aware of it." (162). Against the unitary myth the Zulu revolution is claimed to have fostered by some writers, the Zulu of Mofolo have come to develop some ethnic pride that makes them despise neighboring tribes, an attitude that causes division in postcolonial Africa. Moselekatse, one of Chaka's generals, is quoted advocating ethnic purity to men of his regiment when he tells them that "[i]n the first place we must have wives, and they must be Zulus. That means that we have to go back home and fetch the young women of our regiment, because we cannot take as wives the dogs of foreign nations." (140) By foreign nations, the character does in no way refer to western nations but actually to neighboring tribes. But such are myths that they must not be checked too closely: they sometimes convey an ambivalent discourse whose semantic openness is rejected out of ideology. They should not be understood literally.

Chaka is craving for violence and launches countless attacks against neighboring tribes just for the sake of his own pride. There is no unitary goal in these campaigns which are motivated by the leader's megalomaniac ambition and his sick thirst for violence. He does not even attack to loot (which he often does as a subsidiary goal) but to feel the joy of attacking and reducing to ashes tribes which were once prosperous. His liking to an animal is telling about the impossibility for him to speak in the name of any human ideal. At a time when he can no more go to war to appease his killing instinct because he is ill, "he longed to see people dying by his own hand. He craved to witness death." (154-155) He is unable to defend any social value. Such an account is no more heroic but rather sickly narcissistic. Chaka becomes an animal and cannot embody human values and ideals as follows:

> After Noliwa's death, Chaka underwent a frightful change both in his external appearance and also in his inner being, in his very heart; and so did his aims and his needs. Firstly, the last spark of humanity still remaining in him was utterly extinguished in the terrible darkness of his heart; his ability to distinguish between war and wanton killing or murder vanished without a trace, so that to him all these things were the same, and he regarded them in the same light. Secondly, his human nature died totally and irretrievably, and a beast–like nature took possession of him; (127-128)

Chaka defends no ideal here and symbolizes no valuable myth. If for many writers Chaka has often been used as the Symbol of Africa's pride and dignity, an inspiration to the proponents of the pan African ideal, this narrative destroys all these myths. It rather seems to be attempting to convey a new picture of the hero that denies all the qualities that are often associate with a hero. This tone of the narrator violates the established tradition of storytelling concerning epic tales.

2- The Inversion of Bardic Tradition: from Celebration to Denigration.

There is a long tradition of storytelling that consists in celebrating heroes and leaders. This aspect of traditional heroic narrative is present in *Chaka* but as a reverse process. Instead of celebrating, the narrator denigrates. The narrative is a paradoxical artistic enterprise. Mofolo creates a hero and sets to kill the product of his own creation. He never allows readers to have any sympathy for the hero for long. He acknowledges that Chaka suffered in his childhood. He shows that the hero's subsequent development into a "monster" is a consequence of this difficult and unfair treatment he went through. But when the novel closes, readers are left with the impression that Chaka is more an accused person than a victim.

When most readers would be expected to express sympathy for a character who chooses love over power, Chaka does the contrary outright. He sacrifices love on the altar of power thus frustrating the sympathy of most readers. By killing Noliwa whom he loved and who loved and trusted him beyond everything else, Chaka is unlikely to rally any sympathy from his readers.

He kills his own mother who went through a lot of misfortunes for his own sake. Most readers (particularly Africans) are unlikely to forgive matricide which can be considered as the crime beyond crimes. In most traditional narratives, the maternal figure is the aid, the last recourse when the hero is in danger. She often represents the source of his powers and protection. Whether it is in Niane's Sunjata, J.P Clark's Ozidi, Camara's Kambili, the mother is always a pillar of the narrative and helps the hero achieve his destiny. The well-established principle of "badenya" or mother – son bond identified by Charles Bird in most epic traditions of Africa is broken here. (in Belcher : 98) By killing his mother, Chaka is made to break a taboo, a rather rare attitude in this genre which is likely to rally readers' disapproval. Where in other epic narratives the hero's self-centeredness is celebrated as what marks him out in comparison to other non-heroic figures, here Chaka's lack of humility is likely to frustrate most readers' feelings. Chaka believes in his divine nature and presents himself as a god sent. His preferred praise greeting is "Bayede" which he claims to have received from Nkulunkulu, the local supreme divinity. He expects his subjects to "pay homage to him and worship him" (115):

> [T]he greeting I have been told to teach you is Bayede. It is a greeting with which you will greet only me, and no one else; even in jest, you must never say to another person "Bayede", because merely to say that will be your death; […] I say to you, my children, respect this command from Nkulunkulu ." Bayede means he who stands between God and man, it means the junior god through whom the great God rules the kings of the earth and their nations. (115)

The narrator alienates readers' sympathy even further by depicting a character who is so self-centered that he believes that even cattle pay homage to him. This is not the boldness readers admire in epic characters like Sunjata, Kambili, Ozidi, Kelefaa which leads these heroes to take risks against uncommon adversities to the point of appearing reckless and casual. This boldness renders them even more sympathetic. In *Chaka*, on the other hand, the hero is made to repel any positive reaction to his excessive ego. His lack of humility reaches one of its peaks when he expects humans and animals to praise and worship him. This megalomaniac ego culminates into buffoonery and verges on madness which are no common traits of epic heroism. Like M.Cervantès' Don Quixote who is a sympathetic character for a novel but would not make an epic hero, Mofolo's Chaka, would ideally be a novel's hero but not an epic one as far as this almost buffoonery trait is concerned.

Chaka has both physical and intellectual qualities that he shares with most epic heroes. But he uses these qualities to reach personal evil goals. He has the mystical qualities that the epic hero often displays; his, however, are used in the service of evil forces, that is, witchcraft

which is unlikely to draw him the sympathy of readers. If most African readers are familiar with stories with witchcraft, they are unlikely to see it as a positive value particularly when it leads to commit murders as is the case with the killing of Noliwa for practices of 'black' magic.

Chaka is handsome and has physical qualities that distinguish him from other members of his community; however, the way these qualities are used in the story ends up alienating readers' sympathy. He often undresses during festivities for his own narcissistic pleasure and for his subjects to admire his body. The narrator in the true tradition of praise narrating confesses the legendary handsomeness of his hero but the description of his striptease shows during festivities has undertones of a moral reproach for his lack of any sense of moderation in his own appreciation and longing for other people's admirations:

> Chaka was in the habit of walking in this section disrobed of his skin kaross, wearing only his fringe skirt. This he did at the request of his 'sisters' so that they might feed their eyes on his beautiful body, because Chaka was a strikingly beautiful man. […] Even on the battlefield his men, when wounded and about to die, would request the king, as their last wish, to disrobe so that they might admire his body for the last time, and he would, indeed, do as they asked. (111)

Mofolo's Chaka has all the qualities (moral-physical-destiny) that other heroes of this type of narratives have. But he has other negative attributes that these heroes do not have. He pushes these traits to their unacceptable extremes to the point of alienating the sympathy of the readers. If we consider that a hero is not a character, but a structure, a construction and the product of the reader's active construction, we can say that readers have not been encouraged to accept the character and his action into their belief system. The narrator seems to be trying hard to question the heroic nature of his character. The usual complicity of the genre between narrator and hero is not present here. It has been replaced by an ironic distance if not an open denigration of hero by narrator. This is often achieved by some stylistic devices. Chaka claims he walks to the square to greet the people of the city but the narrator inserts an expression to question this politeness of the Zulu king:

> When he left this place he would go to the square where the regiments were in order to greet the people of his city, or rather to be greeted by the people of his city, and by the city regiment. The greetings he received here in the square were extremely pleasing since they were performed in the presence of everybody, in a place frequented by all the people of the city. (111)

Chaka publicly claims he has no wife and won't get married to any woman. Where could he find a woman worthy of his divine nature here on earth? Women on earth can only be mothers and sisters. Yet the most beautiful girls of the nation are, against all logic, kept in a long row of houses where they live. They are at the disposal of the king. Every member of the community calls them the "king's women" but Chaka calls them his 'sisters'. The narrator always makes sure the ruler is presented as what he truly is, i.e. a liar:

> Behind that house of the king's was a long row of houses in which the king's women lived. But Chaka had no wife, he never married. Instead he chose for himself the most beautiful girls in the nation, who were well built and smooth and brown like the cannabis seed; the ones with beautiful bodies and perfect poise, and he kept bringing them into those houses. He called them his sisters, which meant they were ones with whom he could have no carnal contact, and yet they were the very ones whom he

> continually visited; he ate the young fruit of other men's daughters, picking the very flower of their youth, and then when they became too worn out to please him, he would pass them on to his councilors, if they were still alive. (109)

The irony of the tone is here for everyone to read and no one misses the conspicuous sarcasm of the narrator. Chaka is not only a liar, he is a polygamous ruler, a dictator who has established rape as a king's prerogative since all beautiful girls of the nation are his. When he is fed up with them, he passes them to his counselors. As this particular point is concerned, it is not only feminist readers who will reject him as a hero. Any reader a bit concerned about human rights can only be skeptical about his heroic stature. Wherever he mentions this claim of Chaka that all these women are his sisters, the narrator writes the words between quotation marks, "his sisters", to convey the ironic gap between the character and the narrator. In traditional oral narratives, there is a real complicity between narrator and his characters.

All these aspects of the character make Chaka no easy hero in the classical sense. This reveals that heroism is no easy concept either. A character becomes a hero according to his narrator's goal and the belief system of his readers. Mofolo seems to have been caught into the uneasy position of presenting a historical figure established as a hero but for whom he, perhaps by education, had no sympathy. It remains difficult to say if he has succeeded in firmly establishing the heroic stature of Chaka or in demystifying this picture. The literary productions of most African writers rather suggest that they have opted for the heroic image thus keeping their distance from aspects of Mofolo's model.

Conclusion

The construction of literary heroes seems to be in line with the evolution of ideas. Heroes are also cultural products. That is why each epoch and each culture seem to generate its own type of heroes. We have thus read stories about divine heroes, animal heroes, heroes who are human beings with exceptional qualities and gifts. If the feudal period had a type of hero reflecting its values, the modern and the postmodern eras have showed new types of heroes. Heroes are not mere characters; they are vessels of symbolic actions or beliefs and often embody the norms of a given society. Thus today's hero may be yesterday's villain or vice-versa. In that same way, the hero of a given community may be the villain of another.

Chaka has all the characteristics of a classical epic hero. He shares with other heroes of the genre the motifs of the extraordinary birth and childhood, the exile and the victorious home coming. This said, Chaka remains a problematic hero whose image reaches no consensus among historians, literary critics and even artists. By some of his qualities he is an epic hero in a true sense of the word but some of his character traits will easily rank him among villains of the African literary realm.

Whatever the view one may have on Chaka, he remains a hero in a sense that he inspires imaginations, actions and discussions. Lots of controversies have been raised by his character. He is a symbolic figure of African history of resistance, pride and glory. He still remains a source of inspiration for those who aspire to the unification of the African peoples. All these aspects of his personality prove Chaka's heroic nature. In a general context of suspicion for heroic narrative and characters of postcolonial literature, Chaka, despite his shortcomings can serve as a model to "write the hero back home" (Halldorson: xii)

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