Violence in Two African Epics: A Comparative Study of Chaka and Sundiata

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Abstract: This paper discusses heroic violence in the epics of Sundiata, the Emperor of Old Mali, and Chaka the Zulu king who revealed himself as a military strategist to English colonizers of southern Africa. Notwithstanding the violence treasured by the griot in one epic (Sundiata's) and decried by the Christian author in the other (Chaka's), the truth remains that the heroic exploits of these two historical figures are capitalized by their contemporaries as a source of reference for their present daily experience.

Keywords: Mande, Zulu, heroism, violence, griot, history, contemporary

Introduction

Reliance on oral culture (i.e. the spoken word and its related culture) as a medium of expression on the African continent is no secret. Unlike certain nations that privileged writing in order to confer a perennial character to acts and deeds of their people –that is to make their trace indelible on the pages of History–, some African language communities relied on memory and the spoken word to tell about themselves, what they feel and what things and people should be. In addition to the above-mentioned historical categories, orality was used to tell what occurred, what the people who had come to pass as the great figures and torches of their communities did. The content and the purpose of epic poetry and/or narrative fall in this category. In pre-European colonial Africa, there were well-known epics including, among countless others, the Mvet of Cameroon, the Ozidi story recorded by J-P Clark Bekederemo as *The Ozidi Zaga*, *The Epic of Kelefaa Saane* as told by Sirifo Camara, among others. These epics were told by the *jeliw* (griots) among West Africa's Mande people[1] and *imbongi* among the people of southern Africa.

The present analysis deals with the life and warring exploits of Sundiata Keita,[2] the Emperor of Old Mali and those of Chaka, the Zulu king, two (mythical and/or

[1] "Jeliw" is the plural for "jeli" in Maninka, the language of the Mande people. However, Anglophone Maninka of Gambia has the singular as *jalool* whose plural form is *jali*. For this form of utterance, see *The Epic of Kelefa Saane* (Preface ix) as translated by Sana Camara from Sirifo Camara's 1987 performance in Senegal. The word may translate into griot, which is of an uncertain origin to mean bard. Opposing writing to orality or memory, jeli Mamadou Kouyate, the narrator of Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* states, "Other people use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret" (Niane 41).

[2] The name of the founding father of the Mali Empire is often spelt variously; the francophone in West Africa call him Soundiata, in the everyday talk, the Mandinka usually say Sunjata, and

legendary) figures who have marked the history of their respective people and who have been subject-matter for various and differing narrations. The stories of these great men were told for some practical reasons. Politically considered, the telling served the purposes of building confidence in communities in times of devastation and despair, as well as reminding rulers of the norms of rulership when the latter tended to deviate from them.

Violence in the stories of Sundiata and Chaka, as in most epic stories recorded, is a very recurrent feature and it even appears to stand for, as it were, what heroes feed on. The study singles out instances where the hero seems to merely excel in the "language of violence", i.e. the use of violence for its own sake. Those who narrate the life of the leaders believe that violence is a necessity in that it establishes the grandeur of the heroes. The celebration of violence in epics in general, and in African ones in particular, serves some political agendas that a first reading or assessment of the epics does not reveal.

The Sundiata's story comes in various versions and shapes. This plurality may be explained by both the bard's allegiance or taste and the geographical spot where the story unfolds. The story comprises slight differences according as one listens to it in Gambia, Mali, or Guinea. In present-day Mali, versions of Sundiata include, among many others, Mamby Sidibé's *Soundiata: Héros historique et légendaire, empereur du Manding*, Massa Makan Diabaté's *Kala Jata* (1970) as well as his *L'Aigle et l'épervier ou la geste de Sunjata* (1975) both narrated by Kele Monzon Diabaté, and John William Johnson's *The Epic Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* collected with Fa-Digi Cissoko. Guinean bard Djanka Tassé Condé narrated the story to David Conrad who translated it as *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*. This work focuses on Tamsir Niane's version (*Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*), which is in French and the first recorded account of the story taken to scholarly attention. Niane's account is mostly a narrative unlike the later versions which have Western poetical patterns. Similar to the Sundiata story, the life of the Zulu king has a great deal of variants. Although the Mofolo version of the Chaka story does not qualify stylistically and structurally as an epic, it is no less close to it insofar as nearly all the epic characteristic elements find a confluence in the work. Thus, this study will only deal with Mofolo's *Chaka*, the first textualization of this great African/ Zulu story as retranslated by Daniel P. Kunene. It too has a narrative form (a novel), the first account ever recorded on Chaka.

Mystery-Shrouded Birth

Some historical accounts present Chaka as an illegitimate son who was born in 1787. Mofolo tells us that Nandi, Chaka's mother, was impregnated by King Senzagakona who, fearing exposure to the punishment applicable to the outcome of his adulterous act, had to quickly celebrate their wedding. As is the case with the birth of African epic heroes, the coming of the Zulu hero is announced by the oracle. When his mother is about to birth him, nature gets into a vast movement; storms and endless rain are upon the land. The mysteriousness of the hero's birth is even emphasized in the visual narration of his life-story. William Faure's 1986 *Chaka Zulu* shows how nature

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some call him *Son-Jara*, which is the title of John William Johnson's recording, a spelling that means "iron-hearted", "pitiless", and "cruel". Some even call him *Sonjata*, which mean Jata the thief. In this paper, I will elect Sundiata.

provided the background for the coming of the heroic figure. The film shows that the universe enters a commotion and communes with the hero's coming through heavy rain, thunderbolt, and flashes of lightening. Senzagakona feels in his guts, after the birth of Chaka, that this boy will be his heir. Even King Jobe, Senzagakona's Mthethwa overlord, has the intimation that the child born to the king of Dingiswayo is meant to be a great soul. Upon hearing the news of Chaka's birth, King Jobe makes the following wish: "Go and say to your master that I am thankful for his sake, and that I wish that the child should grow into a human being and a man of worth." (Kunene, 6) Mofolo comments that "Jobe too spoke like one who knew what this child was going to become in the world, and he did the proper thing by placing the matter in the hands of his sons." (Ibid.) Unlike in Mofolo and like in Faure's cinematic rendering, the birth of Sundiata also sets into motion supernatural forces in/and the entire universe. The hero's birth is celebrated by the universe as jeli Mamadou Kouyate confides to Niane:

> Suddenly the sky darkened and great clouds coming from the east hid the sun, although it was still the dry season. Thunder began to rumble and swift lightening rent the cloud; a few large drops of rain began to fall while a strong wind blew up. A flash of lightening accompanied by a dull rattle of thunder burst out of the east and lit up the whole sky as far as the west. Then the rain stopped and the sun appeared and it was at this very moment that a midwife came out of Sogolon's house, ran to the antechamber and announced to Nare Maghan that he was the father of a boy. (Niane, 13)

The hero's birth is almost always laden with mystique and mystery. The mystical events that surround the hero's birth do not shield him from hard time and extreme suffering. Unlike the birth of "ordinary and normal" humans, the condition of possibility of the hero's birth is the commitment of the helping hands of a god or a supernatural force that either anticipates or delays the process of coming to life. Niane's variant of Sundiata's story has it that his coming to life was announced a long time ago to the father by some itinerant hunters. The hero's mother is a hunchback, ugly but very gifted with witchcraft. Other variants state that the pregnancy took some amount of time. For example, however unreasonable and surrealist this portion of the story may be, Jeli Djanka Tassé Condé tells us in David Conrad's translation that Sunjata spent long years in Sogolon's womb: "This went on for seven years/ When the seventh year arrived / Sogolon Condé left town." (Conrad, 72-3)

Even though Chaka's birth is not celebrated by the sky, from which he later draws a name both for himself (Zulu) and Mazulu (for his people) in Mofolo's account, the hero rises to prominence. He treaded the path of greatness like any hero to such a point that "it was rumored that [he] was not at all a human being who resembled other people, for even his mother's months of pregnancy had not, according to those who claim to know, reached the number of months of the pregnancy of women." (Kunene, 26)

The Hero's Predicament

The birth of the epic hero is usually followed by rejection and ostracism. The hero travels through a string of crises that he surmounts. Both Chaka and Sundiata first suffer

rejection either through their mother who is rejected by the community or the hero himself is simply cast away. Chaka has hard time coexisting with his father Senzangakhona. The father in a longstanding polygamous marriage has not been able to father a male child who would inherit his stead. In search for a solution to his problem (the lack of a male child in the lineage) Senzagakhona impregnates Nandi whose baby would be a boy. The king therefore fixes breach left open the patriarchal succession. Chaka and his mother are driven out of the village by Senzangakona because his wives, out of rivalry as is the case in any polygamous family and in epics, exert strong pressure upon him to get rid of Chaka who appears more and more of a threat to their sons –now that they had the chance to give life to rightful-claimants to the throne of the chief– as he was getting gaining more and more extraordinary qualities and might. The co-wives of Nandi threaten to report to King Jobe a hierarchical superior to Chaka's genitor, and by the same way to the attention of the public, the affair of their husband, which resulted in the conception of Chaka because accepting the mother and her son is unacceptable. Their reaction to intruders are encapsulated in their words as they say: "We fail to understand why we should be disgraced by such a dog as Nandi who came to your house already pregnant when we ourselves were maidens, and in every way unblemished, when you married us." (Kunene, 10)

Various accounts of the Sundiata story have it that the hero, his young brother and sister, and his mother have to leave Mande. Sassouma Berete and her son would not give them peace. Sundiata's presence in the kingdom is a threat to the newly enthroned king. As he grows and cumulates feats and acts of bravery he creates an unsafe environment for himself. Like Chaka who has the assistance of a witch-doctor Isanusi whose occult powers make of him a "man-boy," thereby making up his strength all through his years of iron-hand rule over his people and those in the vicinities, Sundiata receives the help of witches who advise him to leave after preparing him for a sure return to the throne. Witchcraft, or magic, in epic poetry seems very essential to the making of the hero as Isidore Okpewho notices it in his *The Epic in Africa*. Opkewho believes that "Magic makes the hero all the more insuperable, his victory over his enemies all the more assured, deadly, final." (Okpewho, 119) As a child Chaka shows the characteristics of a special person, one to be reckoned with, for unlike "children who 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 inflicter 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." (Kunene, 7)

Like Chaka, Sundiata fights against odds. Not only is he lame, but also his mother is destitute and without any help despite the opulence of the royal family. His uprooting of the baobab tree is a metaphor for his defeating any hurdles that will stand on his way to power. In addition to his birth which mobilizes the whole universe, the reader discovers that Sundiata's mother, who has a shocking ugliness and yet a woman possessing good luck, is the shadow of a buffalo; this is evocative of the supernatural powers she controls according to other variants of the story. Still amazing is the hero's spending of seven years stuck on to the ground only to walk with one day as he decides so with an iron rod that the blacksmith of the family make for him. He undergoes the

same lot as Chaka because he will soon be driven out of his father's kingdom because of the threat that he poses to the son of Sassouma Berete, the co-wife of Sogolon Kedjou. In both epics, the hero's exile is a full-fledged part of his formative process. One would reasonably say that without the duress of his life after the death of Maghan Kon Fatta as well as the attending exile, Sundiata would not have become a consummate Simbon (Master-Hunter). He is already a hunter when he organizes campaigns with his peers of Niani. However, it is exile that shapes best his spirit, personality and individuality. Sunjata reaches prominence only after he spends some time at the Mema court of King Moussa Tounkara who, after three years, appoints him "kan-koro-sigui, his Viceroy and in the absence of the king it was he who governed." (Niane, 37) Similar to Sundiata, Chaka is fortified by his Isanusi who shows him an itinerary not dissimilar to Sundiata's; the witch-doctor instructs Chaka to move to a place where his destiny of a man will be fulfilled. To be a man for Chaka and Isanusi means to wield the spear, to spill blood. Like a farmer, Chaka must cultivate his kingship: "let your spear be your hoe, use it and use intelligently […] Remove the weed from your garden of kingship with war and that is how you will achieve your fame. At Dingiswayo's you will find a place where the spear is put to great use […]" (Kunene, 46 -7) Chaka hoards fame, pride and respect at Dingiswayo's with a spear as Sundiata did at Tounkara's with the same weaponry. It ought to be added that these two heroes' spears and bows may be identical in shape with other warriors' weapons; however, they are not parallel and common in immaterial value. The blacksmiths of Sundiata's father make him weapons that offer him victory and invincibility. So does Isanusi with Chaka's spear. Opkewho aptly captures this feature in African epic stories as he states, "It is recognized that the hero, if he is to execute his feats with effectiveness and finality, should be equipped with far from ordinary weapons, and these are often fashioned in an atmosphere of mysticism or acquired in far from natural circumstances." (Okpewho, 117)

Like Sundiata who terrorizes wild animals prior to his exile, Chaka kills a lion and other wild animals at his father's place, which feat reached the ears of Dinguiswayo, the paramount chief of the region, who will offer him asylum and care up to his accomplishment as a leader. Still at his father's place, the hero kills a hyena and some other wild beasts that are ravaging their hamlets and surroundings. This earns him praise-songs for master-hunters.

The feats of Chaka give way to hostility between him and his half-brothers which leads up to a deadly battle between him and Mfokazana. The battle claims the live of one of his brother's companions. Thus starts a man-hunt, the chief orders his capture, if not his murder. Chaka has already touched the heart of people around him because of his bravery and intelligence, which is why they cannot help singing the following pitiful and dirge-like song:

> Alas! You gods, think of us.
> Look upon us who are being killed for a crime that is not there.
> Alas! You spirits, you are our witnesses,
> You are the witnesses of that that day in the fields.
> Alas! The king is without truth,
> He is without truth, he is a chameleon.
> Even when we have born for him a male child,

A male child, a conqueror of the mighty ones.
Alas! Senzangakhona is afraid of his equals,
And vents his rage upon the defenceless. (Kunene, 33)

This sorrowful song is both an appeal to the ancestors and to the spirits and gods in order for them to watch over the "man child" who is already cast in an oppositional relation on the power and feat level with his father. More importantly, a boy is viewed as the savior of the people, which somewhat foreshadows the future of the hero since events will catapult him to a higher a stage of consciousness. In fact, being driven from home instills in the hero the desire to inflict harm, wrongly and rightly, without a dim of remorse. His isolation brings him closer and closer to his mentor Isanusi, an encounter that estranges him from doing things judged as being wrong. He resolves, after his various meetings with the witch-doctor, which strengthened him against all the ordeals he has suffered that he will do as he likes: "I shall kill whomever I wish to kill, whether he is guilty or not, because this is the law of the world (Kunene 48). Chaka's lack of mercy is explained shortly after by Mofolo though: "I will never have mercy on a person simply because of his pleadings."(Ibid.) Therefore, according to Mofolo, Chaka's behavior is justifiable and justified because the hero feels betrayed by his father. And were it not for that state of affairs, he would have been in good terms with Senzangakona.

Naturally, he abides by the self-made rule throughout his power-based relations with others when he steps through the threshold leading to chieftaincy. When Senzangakhona dies, his sons become chiefs in a self-appointed manner since they have to enjoy the unction of the paramount chief, Dingiswayo, who happens to be one of Chaka's powerful allies and godfathers. Chaka has the full support of Isanusi whose two lieutenants, Malunga and Ndlebe, help him during the different wars he fights. Likewise, as he is under the aegis of his benefactor Dingiswayo, all this will enable Chaka to conquer his heritage. After many battles, which bring him to prominence, fame and leadership, and political skills and the death of Dingiswayo his benefactor slain by Swide, Chaka seizes the paramount chieftaincy. He rules over the territory of Dingiswayo and conquers many more territories and fights many wars. He subdues the vanquished, gather them together to form a new nation that he calls the Mazulu which means "the people of the sky," Zulu being the sky to which he henceforth identify. When Isanusi and his cohorts attempt to laugh at Chaka's choice, he has to provide a reason for his renaming: "Mazulu. It is because I am big, I am like that same cloud that just rumbled, before which no one can stand. Likewise, when I look upon other nations they tremble. And the one upon whom I pounce is wiped out […]" (Kunene 103) Chaka thus elevates himself analogically to the height of the heavens, which leads his people to doing the same. They deify him and consider him to be a messenger of *Nkulunkulu* –God–, which is confirmed by Ndlebe and Malunga, handymen of Isanusi. Chaka reorganizes his people and his kingdom and brings in new regulations such as the abolition of circumcision, which is a waste of time for him; and the obligation of celibacy upon the warriors who only marry with his accord and when he pleases it. This is really the pinnacle of power, which Mofolo as a good Christian, if not any monotheist, derides.

At age of eighteen, jeli Kouyate tells us, Sundiata "had the stateliness of the lion and the strength of a buffalo. His voice carries authority and his eyes were live coals, his arms were iron, he was the husband of power." (Niane, 47) "The stateliness of lion"

recalls the title of his father and the strength of a buffalo" the power of his mother that is bestowed on him. The fact that the hero has become the husband of power is evocative of his maturity so as to "straddle" the throne of his father, of which he has been deprived by his half-brother. Also important is the confrontation he intends to perform with Sumanguru Kante, the Sosso king who has invaded the land of his father, dislodged the hero's half-brother is from power, and occupied Mande. Sundiata returns home the way he promised to when he was leaving Mande.

Recourse to Violence

The return of the hero is catapulted by the hardships that his people lives while he is away. Both Sundiata and Chaka were sent away out of sibling rivalry. Sundiata was cast away by his mother's co-wife and his half-brothers. Chaka was rejected by his father's many wives and the potential heirs to the father's throne. The return home in both epic stories reveals the hero's recourse to force, power and violence to reinstate himself into the power-broking game.

Sundiata's comeback is occasioned by the call cast to him by his desperate people, which is the beginning of his "warlordship" and his career as a political strategist. Coming home with a well-trained and disciplined troop –his iron squadron– to liberate his fatherland from the Susus, Sundiata surprises them with the dexterity and might of a long-year warrior. As the bards usually do, the jeli describe the violent and bloody battle of Kirini:

> The Sossos were surprised by this sudden attack for they all thought that the battle would be joined the next time. The lightening that flashes across the sky is slower, the thunderbolts less frightening and the floodwaters less surprising than Soundiata swooping down on Sosso Balla and his smiths. In a trice, Sundiata was in the middle of the Sossos like a lion in the sheepfold. The Sossos, trampled under the hooves of his fiery charger, cried out. *When he turned to the right the smiths of Soumaoro fell in their tens, and when he turned to the left his sword made heads fall as when someone shakes a tree of ripe fruit. The horsemen of Mea wrought a frightful slaughter an their long lances pierced flesh like a knife sunk into a paw-paw*. (Niane, 49-50)[Italics are mine]

This graphic description of the Tabon battle tells so much about the Mande society. It is needless to say that the vindictive rage of the hero, as well as his eagerness to don the garb of the emperor of the Mande people, makes him plan strategies that entail violence on the enemy. This sort of gigantic display of violence is relayed with joy by griots who term it "jugufaga," i.e. the ruthless and pitiless extermination of the enemy. The annihilation of the enemy is evidently the barometer of masculinity. No wonder why those who defeat enemies are praised for being a "tchefaari" or ruthless and lion-hearted men. Masculine qualities are what the Mande people look for in their leader. The failure to display those traits makes the aspirant to the throne simply unqualified.

Balla Fasseke Kouyate, Sundiata's griot, called the men of Mande to lion-

heartedness and the annihilation of their foes on the eve of the Kirina battle.[3] He composed the "dugha" –which "is primarily a military sing which valorizes brutal power, fearlessness, and cunning battle strategies." (Diawara, 91) Sory Camara collected and translated the dugha from Mande to French in 1975 in a seminal work entitled *Gens de la parole*. The praise-song reveals the qualities that are required of the warrior:

> Quand la déflagration de la poudre au loin retentit,
> Le Vautour du Mãde se réjouit, le Vautour plane.
> ……
> Les hommes braves pour qui l'on joue l'air du vautour
> Ceux-là meurent, mais ceux-la ne connaissent point la peur !
> Woi ! Tous les hommes ne dansent pas sur l'air du Vautour !
> (Camara, 1992: 282)[4]

Mande poets remind the posterity of Samori's hymn to war. Sundiata's first battle draws to him all the surrounding chiefs and those who are wronged by Soumaoro, chief among whom is his nephew Fakoli Da-aba. The coalition of the troops of the King with his new allies made the decisive battle of Kirina, a victory whereby Soumaoro is defeated and his kingdom destroyed, thereby consecrating the paramount chieftaincy of Sundiata.

Violence here is depicted both shockingly and graphically as is the case in Chaka's story though the storyteller in Sundiata's saga tends to be supportive of the sheer violence at play. It is something normal for him insofar as it evokes the superiority in might and valor of his century-long patron Sundiata. As a matter of fact, after uncovering the antidote to the power of his adversary Sundiata is about to bring him down both with occult power and military might. The cock-spur that Sundiata prepares to serve as an arrow against his enemy known as the "numumkêba" – the first of the Sosso blacksmiths, a nickname that jeli Kouyate gives Soumaoro– neutralizes the latter's supernatural power as when he is touched by the occult preparation "the inmates of his chamber had lost heir power. The snake in the pitcher was in the throes of death, the owls from the perch were flapping pitifully about the ground. Everything was dying in the sorcerer's abode." (Niane 69) Likewise, the bard tells us the Mande king "had a murderous reserve; they were the bowmen whom the king of the Bobos had sent shortly before Krina. The archers of Bobo are the best in the world." (Ibid. 68) They set the ramparts of the fortress of Soumaoro on fire in order to break into it and they "opened the gates to the main body of the army. Then, the massacre began. Women and children in the midst of fleeing Sossos implored mercy of the victors."(Ibid.) They clear the city of its occupants, any valuables

[3] Manthia Diawara summarizes the "duga" as follows: "Men of Mande, tomorrow let me sing you the song of vultures, for I want to see your enemies' blood run like a river" (Diawara 91). Clearly, this is a call to violence as the intent is to soak the ground with blood.

[4] These segments may be translated as follows: "When there is a gunshot far away/ The Mande vulture rejoices and hovers over people's head./ Those brave men for whom the song of the vulture is sung /Those men who die on the font are fearless!/ Woi! Not all men dance to the tune of the vulture!"

are taken outside of the town and Sundiata "gave the order to complete its destruction." (Ibid.) The end of Soumaoro's rule is stamped with the same violence he used when defeating the chieftains of the area from where he is finally routed. Soumaoro's violence as well as the counterviolence that upsets it shows that epic violence is a decorum that operates on the negation of one form of violence by another. On cannot say less for Chaka. First, the man inherits a kingdom where internecine warfare and violence are the norm. Then, the hero's resolve to use violence as a modus operandi seems to be commanded by the way his kingdom is politically designed and organized.

Mofolo's story portrays Chaka as a warmonger and a bloodthirsty who acts at the command of a witch-doctor. The witch-doctor is characterized by Mofolo as the incarnation of malice, wickedness and treachery who, before undertaking anything, makes sure to have care Chaka's consent. From the last medicine Isanusi gives to Chaka to the oaths he takes with the witch-doctor (killing of Noliwa for power and the ritualistic bloodletting to soak the ground for more fame), Isanusi lures Chaka into accepting the terms of his involvement and aid. The sorcerer plays on the aspirations of the hero who must abide by the condition laid before him. In order to turn Chaka into the hero he wills, Isanusi asks him to rid his heart of any feeling of mercy, companionshp and even affection; he indulges in the requests for the want of chieftaincy, fame and wealth. He is asked to choose between Noliwa and the chieftaincy and he chooses to screen the blood of Noliwa for more power. As he pretends to do "what a man does with a woman" and to be more loving than ever, Chaka sacrifices his "wife":

> "[T]hen suddenly Chaka covered Noliwa's mouth with his powerful hand, and he stabbed her with the needle in the armpit, and then he turned her over, with the stabbed armpit facing upward so that the blood flowed back inside the body. (Kunene, 126)

Here is a sheer violence, physical violence cloaked in rituals, which is commonplace in any religious practices, as well as evocative of the boundless cruelty of the hero. Noliwa is a sacrificial "beast," her blood has to flow for her man to achieve power. Here Chaka performs a great supreme sacrifice, which could be performed in traditional religions by simply substituting Noliwa for an animal because, as René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* recognizes it, in the case of rites or sacrifices that requires bloodletting, violence "is not to be denied but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into" (Girard, 4). The fact of submitting Noliwa to that supreme sacrifice, which she seems to acquiesce in, may not only be construed as Chaka's lust for blood, and the subsequent result of such an obsession, but also it sheds light on the very idea that certain religious practices rhyme with violence on which they actually breed. The ritual violence to which the Zulu leader lends himself through the deployment of physical violence obeys the rule of what may be dubbed called political violence. It is clear that these three forms of violence intertwine in the case of Chaka to secure him might, fame and glory. For, in order to achieve the political grandeur he lusts for he uses violence –which Dutton in his introduction to Mofolo's novel calls "all-destroying blood-lust," (Dutton/Mofolo, 13) – he imposes himself by the spear and blood, which are reminiscent of contemporary rules in Africa.

The attainment of Chaka's goals passes through a rite that appears to be very

difficult to perform as he does not regain peace of mind after the murder of his beloved. The witch-doctor can share part, if not a huge part, of the responsibility of Chaka's sinking into horrendous violence; however, Chaka is not all the same forced into blood-hounding by an external agent. It is his inner forces that call him into action against other people. Chaka's violence hits its paroxysm when he gives in killing just for the sake of doing so. As a matter of fact, Chaka becomes more of blood monger after he rises to absolute power, which corrupts him. More crucially, the murder of Noliwa, as per Mofolo's account, is the worst thing Chaka has ever done in his stride toward chieftainship because "with Noliwa's blood he had branded himself with an indelible mark which resembled that of the kings of Isanusi's home." (Kunene, 128) He becomes the cruelty incarnate and, as the title Chapter Nineteen indicates titled "the Slaughter of the Cowards," he slaughters his warriors who return home without the spear of the enemy, on the assumption that they do not behave as men, and face death the proper way. He fills up a gorge with the bodies of those who have been decimated, thereby simply providing easy prey for hyenas and vultures with the dead bodies. Mofolo's Chaka reaches the peak of using horror, terror and cruelty as means of political affirmation when he slays his mother for harboring his own son, the existence of whom is dissonant with his oath made to Isanusi, and a threat to his might and fame. The murder of the hero's mother is followed by a hecatomb since he enjoins his warriors to slay all the companions of his mother. The end of Chaka, as is the case for any bloodthirsty tyrant, is as violent as his own rule; violence begets violence. In fact, he is caught up by his own deeds (the murder of Noliwe precipitates his end as he is tormented and multiplies his acts of horror), murder of his lieutenants –Nongogo and Mnyamana– deals a severe blow to the trust between him and his commanders and officers, which is ultimately exploited by his half-brothers still lying in wait for his certain downfall.

It is reported that the Emperor of Mali developed later a mania for war and destructive violence because he would get bored by peace and quietness. According to some Mande songs, Sunjata is said to have being rendered to silence in a war waged in Niani, which is not most of the time stressed by the bards. Perhaps, those kinds of revelations are what Kouyate tries to obliterate as he warns against knowing what is hidden from us: "Do not seek to know what is not to be known [for to his masters he took] the oath to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed." (Niane, 84)

What should be kept concealed? Does it have to do with the mystic power of the empire, which naturally needs a veil of secrecy or does it have something to do with the way the empire was being ruled by Sundiata, which precipitated his fall? Mande wordsmiths and guardians of secrets won't answer these questions because they are probably outrageous and unacceptable. The dismay and disturbance that arise when one tries to fathom, probe, and question commonly accepted beliefs and stories, as is the case with jeli Kouyate who warns us against it, is a form of violence of and by itself. It is meant to bring the reader or the audience to terms with shock, disbelief, and revolt at times. As Memmi says, "La société ne peut pas supporter ce que l'écrivain va chercher dans les profondeurs de l'inconscient" [Society is able to carry the weight of what the writer intends to bring from the depths of the subconscious.] (Wastberg, 83) Here, the recess of the subconscious is the possible net of errors and excesses of the hero. Babou Condé, a singer of Sundiata's story hints at what Sundiata did after organizing his empire

into a solid political and economic entity:

> Quand Soundjata eut fini de mettre en place ces organisations adéquates, il reprit ses exploits car "Kèlè le ka Malilô", *c'est la guerre qui a construit le Mali*! "Kélè le ka Malité", *c'est la guerre qui a ruiné le Mali!* (Camara 1978 : 235).
> [When Sunjata put in place these organizations, he launched other campaigns because "Kèlè le ka Malilô" (Mali was built through war), and "Kélè le ka Malité" (war destroyed Mali as well)]

Sundiata went on to destroy Kumbi Saleh and undertook other campaigns, according to Babou Condé. The post-Kirina campaigns are very likely ones that were unjustified and unjust, which led to the decline of the empire as is the case throughout history. Sundiata's empire is no exception. This is a truth that the descendants are not usually prepared to integrate in their mind.

Political Appropriations of Epic Prowess

The graphic description of scenes of violence certainly obeys the author's logic of condemnation of folkways, of pagan ways over and against his Christian allegiance. The traditional world, worldviews and modes of practice that he depicts are meant in to certainly win more souls for the cause of imported beliefs in Africa. Mofolo may be accused of collaborationism in that his novel is meant to depict an African leader (the reference of an entire) as a savage and barbaric heathen whose soul is lost. To avoid the perdition of the soul of the leader's descendants, and thereby win their souls for Christianity, the leader's uncharacteristic behavior has to be pilloried. But nonetheless, Mofolo must be credited for having succeeded to draw from the dustbin of oblivion a leader such as Chaka who, according to his version, sew pain and desolation, but who also made show of political greatness and military skill among African chiefs. Likewise, if the time of the publication of this story is taken into account –a period of riots and killings in South Africa– one can reasonably assume that Mofolo was motivated by the political and social mood of his time. Though Mofolo is a Xhosa, a language community known to be in a staunch rivalry and hostility with the Zulus, the historical romance or account of the author can be praised for its timeliness in the fight for black liberation in South Africa at a time when the ingredients of Apartheid regime were getting assembled and put in effect.

The political implications of Mofolo's version begged for a rebuttal, this time around from one of Chaka's own people. Mazisi Kunene researched the history of Chaka and disproved a great deal of claims made by Mofolo. Right from the start, Kunene vows to "cut through the thick forest of propaganda and misrepresentation that have been submitted by colonial reports and historians."(Kenene, 13) He collects information and resubmits the story of Chaka not only in a poetical form, but also he calls the story "Emperor Chaka the Great," which is a very telling title. That's why David Attwell's conclusion looks tenuous when he says that "[…] the criticism has been markedly unwilling to examine Mofolo's novel in the context of the broader historical moment in which it was written –the sociopolitical developments of which it is itself an expression and to which it responds." (Attwell, 51) Kunene's response to Mofolo's representation

could not be more inclusive of the considerations that Attwell believes are sidestepped by critics. The same interpretation of Mofolo might have caused West African poets and writers around the same span of time (1970's) to repel the demoniac representations of their historical leaders by outsiders. Soyinka gives a vitriolic response to negative portrayals and the detractors of Chaka, of whom he says:

> The professional apologists of our time have tried, uncritically, to place in the same category of leaders as Shaka, that murderous buffoon who straddles territory where the great Shaka trod.[5]

It is clear from the above that the figure of Chaka has nothing to do with the negative representation made of him. His personality and story must be used in a creatively positive way, i.e., the artist should use those stories of African great figures in political and ideological manners that help people.

The story of Chaka served as paradigm for certain African writers who saw in the acts and feats of the Zulu leader's bravery, courage and grandeur such as were needed to shake off from the shackles of colonialism from the continent. With regard to the centrality of such story in African history, Senghor who poeticizes the Zulu king says:

> L'histoire nous présente une vision *factuelle* des choses. Le poète, et même tout écrivain digne de ce nom, doit transformer la vision factuelle des faits en vision *symbolique* et, pour tout dire, *significative*.
> [History presents us with a factual vision of things. The poet, and even any writer worthy of that name, should endeavor to transform that factual vision of things into a *symbolic*, and more importantly, a *signifying* one.][6]

In other words, a story, and by extension History, should serve as a backdrop, if not a springboard, whereby the activity of producing meaning develops and serves the descendents of the people whose stories are being told to effect social change. Chaka has pieced together small nations and formed a great one, the Amazulu to face the encroachment of white traders and occupiers of South Africa. He is viewed as nation-builder and a unifier. That's why Senghor posits him as the forerunner of the Negritude and the independence movement in Africa. In addition to Senghor and Soyinka's approach to the story of the Zulu king, there are many other works in West Africa where Chaka is shown under a positive light. Among these fictionalizations, there is Seydou Badian's play *The Death of Shaka*, Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara's play and Djibril Niane's *Shaka*. Beyond the acts of atrocities and the gross violence that Chaka has reportedly committed against his own people, he is, and has remained, great in the imagination and memory of the black people on continent and in the diaspora. How is the violence that makes of the Zulu leader now a monster, now a great leader?

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[5] Soyinka quoted by Charles Bodunde, *Oral and Aesthetic Transfer*, p. 25.

[6] Senghor quoted in the introduction to Donald Burness's *Chaka: King of the Zulus in African Literature*, p. xiv.

Like Chaka's life story and deeds, Sundiata's story has also been the subject of a good deal of re-appropriations within the framework of the independence struggle mostly by African scholars in the regions that used to be parts of Old Mali. For instance, Burkina-born cineaste Dani Kouyaté, son of the late artist Sotigui Kouyaté, made a film titled *Keita! L'Héritage* (*Keita! Voice of the Griot*) in 1995. *Keita* tells parts of the formative years of the 13th century founder of the Mali Empire. Dani and Sotigui hail from the lineage of the first griot recorded in the history of Mali as a political entity. According to Niane's version, Balla Fasseke Kouyate was Sundiata's father's griot, and his son Kouyate was Sundiata's own griot. In *Keita*, the griot tells the founding story of the old empire to young Keita Mabo of a middle-class family in Ouagadougou, thereby perpetuating the role of genealogist, historian and advisor that griots would play in this West African society. If *Keita* only focuses on about one third of the Sundiata's life story, it no less addresses the purpose of past history by the contemporaries of the actors of that very past. Looking into the past is a way to provide the present with newer perspectives and approaches to critical issues. Thus, late Sotigui Kouyate tells us the wherefore of the film *Keita! L'Héritage*:

> Sometimes when you don't know where you're heading, you have to return to where you came from in order to think things over before continuing your journey. Today, with all the things happening to her, Africa has trouble finding which direction to take – modernity, tradition, or some other road. We are not really capable of digesting all these things. We don't know who we are, and we don't know where we are going. We are between two things. Between our traditions and our modernity. (Baaz and Palmberg, 99)

Finding the middle way between traditions and modernity in contemporary Africa has almost always called for scrutinizing the past and its applicability to the present. Thus, in the 1970's when Laurent Gbagbo was imprisoned by Houphouet-Boigny Laurent Gbagbo, he turned the Sundiata story as recorded by Niane into a play (*Soundjata, Lion du Manding*) wherein he finds solace for the throes of his political combat for multiparty system. He even identifies today with the hero in his attempts to maintain control over the country as he deems ex-colonial powers to undermine the independence of his country. As well, Mande people in English-speaking parts of West Africa like the Gambia have their versions of the story of Sundiata. In 1974, Gordon Innes collected from Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute some Gambian versions that he made into *Sunjata: Gambian Versions of the Mande Epic*. In these versions also, the political appropriation is obvious inasmuch as each storyteller leans either on Sundiata, Tira Maghan, Fakoly or on Soumaoro Kante, the arch-enemy of Sundiata, according as he is offered patronage by a descendants of one of these leaders.

Contemporary Views on Heroic Deeds

Militarist attitude has been adopted in Africa during the independence struggles because such was the only language the colonial master could hear. Martinican psychologist and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, advocates for violence to counter colonialism. This is the only language that the French understood in Algeria when he was guerillero. Amilcar Cabral of the Cape Verdian and Bissau-Guinean revolution

elaborated on the approach. Somara Machel of Mozambique tried the revolutionary practice as much as Zimbabweans. Under the ignoble regime of Apartheid in South Africa, the African National Congress resorted to violence. For instance, at his Rivonia trial in 1964 in defense for the use of extreme measures, Nelson Mandela states that "in the light of our political background the choice [of violence] was a logical one" (Minogue et al, 288), and Mandela adds: "I am prepared to die." (Ibid.)

Pertaining to political appropriations of Chaka Zulu, one may as well consider the political role played by M. Buthelezi in South African politics during the Apartheid era. In fact, because of his royal blood and his Zulu nationalist allegiance, the head of the Inkatha party entered into various alliances with the White minority rule in South Africa. One reason for this was that by allying with the Apartheid regime, the Zulu nationalist could better fight it. However, political self-interests reveal that such an alliance was meant to counter the rivals of the African National Congress (ANC). Buthelezi was mythified as a moderate and as someone to be reckoned with by the system in place. Recourse to violence, as if to validate claims that violence is inherent in Zulus, was unforeseen but inevitable when Buthelezi lost prominence with the release of Mandela. To him can be attributed the violent eruptions in the periods after 1986 in the Natal as well as similar happenings in 1990 and in 1994 in the Transvaal. In opposition to the ANC, which was getting more and more politically visible and hard to get unnoticed, Buthelezi used violence to sustain to idea of Zulu nationalism.

In contemporary Mande society which is rather a scattered language community than a compact geographical entity, all deeds and titles of leaders are expressed in formulaic refrains. Mande hunters' society during initiation rites to this day sing "janjon"[7] wherein Sundiata's "simbong" title is extolled in hopes that such will induce Mande men into courage and bravery. In 2005 a group of Mande talented artists produced *Mandekalou* for the purpose of extolling Sundiata's "kala" (bow) and everything that comes with it. The bow refers to his warring qualities as well as reads as a call for his descendants to memorialize the hero. The praise-names he earned following in the footsteps of his father –"Cat on the shoulder/ Simbong and Jata are at Naareng"– are still sung by modern griots. Any contemporary leader to Sundiata in the Mande space is elevated to a place of pride. Malian griotte, Amy Koita produced her 1996 "Djigui" along those lines. The title seeks to inculcate hope in Mande people through the above-mentioned "jugufaga" notion. In a song entitled "Fama" – a praise-song for Almamy Samory Toure –, Koita calls the men of Mande to live in accordance with the cultural and social expectations for a Mande male. Beyond this call to masculine action, she extols the qualities of the Mande leader. In 1969, Aboubacar Demba Camara also sang Samory Toure's hymn to war, which extols the recourse to the extermination of rivals with sword. An excerpt of Demba Camara's translation of the Samoryan hymn is what follows:

> If you are unable to organize, lead and defend your Fatherland,
> Call for men greater valor.
> If you are unable to speak the truth wherever and whenever you are,

[7] Mande writers like Ahmadou Kourouma and Massa Makan Diabate constantly draw from this concept in representing present-day Africa. In *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (translated as *Waiting for the Vote of Wild Animals* by Carrol Coates in 2001), Kourouma explains the "janjon" while Diabate from the griot lineage gives a written version of the heroic song.

Call for men that are more courageous!
If you are unable to be impartial,
Surrender your throne to men that are more righteous!
If you are unable to protect your people and to defeat the enemy,
Give your sword of war to the women who will show you the path to honor!
O Fama! Your people trust you!
They trust you because you are the embodiment of their values.[8]

Chaka and Sundiata may hereby set a framework for Africans who are still dominated and in search of a praxis of liberation. The example of these heroic and epic figures somewhat foregrounds countless liberation movements in Africa in favor of which Frantz Fanon indicated recourse to violence. The Martinican psychologist and liberation theorist once wrote, "[…] Colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence." (Fanon, 23) Even though Algerians, Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, Cape Verdeans and Bissau-Guineans of the last wave of liberation struggles do not have any direct link with Sunjata and Chaka, their struggles and the finality thereof no less cut across; Sunjata and Chaka sought to rid their people of foreign domination and the means to achieve this end was war and violence, which, one must recognize, was both unavoidable and effective. It is not erroneous to perceive the occurrence and use of violence in the aftermath of the liberation of Nelson Mandela in South Africa as a continuity of human reliance on extreme and dangerous and yet necessary means like violence for self-expression and self-affirmation. Thus, although the opposition of Inkhata to the followers of the African National Congress (ANC) may be political, the underlying factor of this opposition is to be found in the Zulu versus other indigenous Africans. According to this paradigm, Buthelezi and his Zulu supporters found it difficult to accept the modern kingship of a leader originating from a community that is historically inferior to the people of Chaka. Temporally different, these eruptions and uses of violence share the political goal in common. Chaka wanted power to show the greatness of his people.

In contemporary South Africa, military violence as opposing indigenous African political factions was about power-sharing as well. In spaces that belonged to Old Mali political tensions are no more visible than in nation-states where coexistence has been imposed by colonial delimitations. Thus, the Mande people are forced to live with peoples that were historically subdued by Mande leadership. The new order whereby equality among members of society is enforced and vertical social structure which is seen as a seed of division appear to be a threat to those who hold dearly to their century-old social and political privileges. The century-old opposition between Mande people and the Jolof has much to do with the Casamance crisis in Senegal. Likewise, in Cote d'Ivoire some scholars accuse the ex-rebel movement of Soro Guillaume, formerly based in Bouake after September 19, 2002 to be attempting to realize the Mande dream of spatial reconfiguration. The author of *Côte d'Ivoire: l'agonie du jardin*, Tiburce Koffi, an Akan advocate of "ivorité" – a purportedly cultural concept coined by former president Henri

[8] This translation is mine. It first appeared in my article titled "Stakes and Challenges of Textualizing Oral Texts: Translating the 'Dugha' and the Samoryan War Hymn". *Revue du Laboratoire des Théories et Modèles Linguistiques*, (LTML) n.6, December 2011.

Konan Bedie in 1993– clearly addresses the fear that is experienced by some communities in Cote d'Ivoire against a putative Mande annexation of Cote d'Ivoire. Koffi writes,

> Le rêve d'annexion du territoire ivoirien n'est pas loin. L'Islam, la langue, la transhumance et le commerce [idiomes culturels et activités expansionnistes à souhait] vont donc se présenter comme les instruments nécessaires à la réalisation de ce grand rêve d'annexion sinon de réunification, proche d'une politique de réajustement territorial: telle est le fondement mythologique de la guerre qui est faite à la Cote d'Ivoire. (Koffi, 326)
>
> [The dream of annexation of Cote d'Ivoire is not far from coming true. Islam, language, transhumance and trade (cultural idioms and expansionist activities at will) are thus presented as the necessary tools for the realization of that great dream of annexation, if not of reunification, close to a policy of territorial readjustment: such is the mythological foundation of the war waged against Cote d'Ivoire]

Factual truth begs something different, however. Koffi's fear is not justified, considering that in Cote d'Ivoire the Mande/Muslim political activism has always been within the bounds of the republic, which gave the impression not to want a portion of its own people. All in all, the truth remains that there is a clear tendency to see some culture of violence profiling behind actions and reactions by peoples or communities from which the two heroic leaders originate. That's why Charles Bodunde's remarks about the inherence of violence among the Zulu must be considered. Bodunde claims that "what provokes Chaka's ruthlessness is not so much the attractiveness of Isanusi's tempting offers as the discovery that his society permits and respects brute force." (Bodunde, 17)

The representation of the violence of Chaka and Sundiata obeys some logic. Chaka's representation by Mofolo is meant to show how violent the hero has purportedly been. As claimed above, Mofolo is giving in the tarzanesque representation of Africans by Western media and literatures. His novel rather helps the missionary who were after the allegedly atheist African savages lying in wait for being proselytized. His comments attest to the depiction of Chaka as a savage and violent king. He violently represented Chaka as much as the Mande bards did Sundiata in praise of his violent deeds. Kunene's version, however, tends to restate Chaka's deeds of valor, his militaristic achievements and legacy, thereby rejecting the demeaning representations of him made by colonial literature and historians. The same gait is adopted by William Faure when he adapted the Chaka story to the screen. Faure deems that Chaka's life account was twisted by white propaganda-celebrating historians who hinged their narratives on "bigoted and sensationalist values – often labeling the Zulus as savage and barbaric. It is our intention with this series to change that view." (SABC & Faure 3)

Conclusion

Chaka Zulu is a spirit lifter for the Zulu nation of South Africa in that from the time he lived, the Zulus have been looking up to him with pride very seemingly because their great king united them and made them a proud people. Certainly, a life narrative

account that portrays Chaka through the eyes of the Zulu –in a way that distances itself from the 17th-century views that picture him as a tyrant, barbaric and a blood-sucking king– does a great service to the descendants of the king. Similarly to Chaka's story recounted after Mofolo's "historical romance," the account of Sundiata's life such as given by griots and the appropriation thereof downplays the destructive and negative essence of epic violence, focusing on the glorious deeds. Thus, Sundiata's descendants treasure his epic prowess as their history.

No doubt, such communal appropriations of myths, legends, and founding (hi)stories usually happen in a way that disregards historical evidence. In most societies, stories that explain the etiology of certain traditions, attitudes and beliefs build on irrational items. Even though the stories of African historical figures have been called into question by anti-Africanist scholarship in Western academia, the life stories of Sundiata and Chaka have been more or less authenticated by African historians. Thus, their lives have been historicized. If the past must inform the present along the lines of the adage that a people without the knowledge of their history is like a tree without roots, then, the descendants and contemporaries of these two kings should learn from the latter's past. Therefore, it is fair to let them "contemporarize" this past; i.e. patterning their present upon a (hi)story that is incontestably theirs.

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