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Literary Pan-Africanism in African epics

The legends of Chaka Zulu and Sundiata Keita

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Thomas Mofolo’s version of the epic of Chaka Zulu seems to be the oldest one and the first to be published. In his introduction to this epic, entitled Chaka, that Mofolo wrote in a novel form, Daniel P. Kunene says that a translated version of the text was available in 1931 although the manuscript was mentioned in a 1912 clergy book entitled Livre d’Or de la Mission de Lessouto. Mofolo’s rendition of Chaka’s story has been hailed as “one of the most important pieces of twentieth century African literature.” This book’s capital stature in African literature is not surprising because it is a pivotal example of literary Pan-Africanism. This position is visible in the fact that Mofolo’s book created the retributive image of Africa as a strong continent inhabited by dignified, proud, and valuable people. This discourse was central in Africa’s fight for independence and world respect, especially during the postcolonial period when numerous contemporary African political leaders revisited Mofolo’s account of Chaka to tell their own versions of this emperor’s resistance against European oppression. Donald E. Herdeck explains: “King Chaka has become the ‘culture hero’ of many Black African intellectuals and increasingly is the subject of poems and plays written by artists far from Zululand.” Twentieth century African authors, such as Leopold Sédar Senghor and Seydou Badian, among others, were drawn to Chaka’s epic because they revised it in ways that allowed them to exemplify black defiance of European imperialism and racism. My exploration of the significance of Chaka’s myth departs from this intellectual tradition that glorified Chaka in the contexts of the early post-independence periods of Africa in which the existence of heroes to whom black people could turn was a necessary source of pride and identification. Rather than quibble with that intellectual tradition, this chapter intends to simply look at how Chaka’s myth reveals both strengths and weaknesses that either embrace or reject Pan-Africanism. In addition, this essay attempts to examine Chaka’s legend as one of the narratives that can be compared with the Malian Epic of Sundiata Keita that was popularized with the publication of Djibril Tamsir Niane’s 1965 version of the story. This comparison shows that both Chaka’s and Sundiata’s epics focus on the incredible and supernatural journeys of heroes and heroines who are compelled to leave their land of birth and forcefully
go to foreign nations in search of survival and substance, and return home to claim their rightful place in a society that had shunned them before. This heroic cycle is a form of literary Pan-Africanism since it serves as a means of garnering a liberator’s consciousness about the importance of defending and protecting their community unless they become corrupted by evil forces.

**Defining literary Pan-Africanism**

The expression “literary Pan-Africanism” is a term that was popularized by Christel N. Temple’s 2005 book, *Literary Pan-Africanism: History, Contexts, and Criticism*. In this book, Temple theorizes the concept of “literary Pan-Africanism” as a study of African literary texts founded on the belief that “historical and cultural critique of the African vision of the African-American experience has the ability to preserve understanding and to improve communication between Africans and African Americans.”

Specifically, Temple invites the scholar of “literary Pan-Africanism” to demonstrate the ways in which:

1. The text seeks to regenerate relationships, historical understanding and future interaction between Africans and the descendants of the Africans dispersed through the European enslavement trade;
2. The writer introduces mutual understanding and nurtures the relationships between Africans and African-Americans;
3. The philosophy and ideals of the narrative parallel tenets of contemporary and/or traditional Pan-African ideology;
4. Texts of this category utilize similar terminology expressive of a return, that consistently demonstrates the usage of the prefix “re-;”
5. The African-American characters are generally non-stereotyped depictions;
6. The author’s social, cultural, political and/or ideological deliberateness is Pan-African, Afrocentric, and/or African-centered;
7. The author usually has spent time among African-American communities in the United States.

While Temple’s ambitious work is praiseworthy due to its emphasis on how Africans perceive African Americans, its focus on this representation as the distinctive characteristic and requirement of literary Pan-Africanism is somewhat problematic. Although Temple’s call for a scholarship “which would evaluate individual African perspectives of the African-American experience at multiple stages of encounter” can yield much in its study, literary Pan-Africanism should include more than such contact. Confining “literary Pan-Africanism” to the study of continental Africans’ views on African Americans may replicate the American monumentalism and exceptionalism that Paul Gilroy laments in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* while resuscitating it in his own neglect of continental Africans’ contributions to black transnational ideas of nationalism and modernity. Yet, to his credit, Gilroy makes a compelling critique of African American particularity when, as John Cullen Gruesser states, he decries it in *The Black Atlantic* as “the belief that because of their experiences in the West and adoption of Christianity, black Americans were the people best qualified to lead Africans and members of the diaspora to the bright future foretold for them.”

Theorizing literary Pan-Africanism mainly as African writers’ depictions of African Americans resuscitates the aforementioned exceptionalism and ignores how the term can have a variety of meaning such as continental Africans’ perceptions of themselves or of the history...
of all blacks, including those of the diaspora among whom African Americans belong. In this vein, Walter Rodney would have somewhat disagreed with Temple’s definition of Pan-Africanism since he partially perceives it as an inquiry that should begin with the connections between blacks of Africa and the Caribbean and end with the links among the world’s downtrodden peoples.9

By contrast, African intellectuals generally conceptualize Pan-Africanism in a fashion which, though emphasizing the importance of the African diaspora and worldwide class struggles against domination, be it capitalist or otherwise, stresses the necessity of continental unity. Consequently, from the vantage point of African intellectuals, “literary Pan-Africanism” would primarily mean a study of how African writers theorize the common issues facing Africa and how they can be overcome through celebrations of a shared sense of history, cultures, and destinies between not just continental Africans, but also between these populations and blacks of the diaspora. This open-ended conception of Pan-Africanism is apparent in Emanuel Geiss’s following statement:

The main concern of twentieth century Pan-African writers has been to prove Africa’s right to independence and the possibility of its rapid development through the introduction of modern techniques. The second great problem was to find some synthesis between the needs of modernization and the preservation of African society and culture. The discussion about Africa’s place in the modern world was indeed more important than the celebration of vague schemes for political union. Pan-Africanism is thus largely African nationalism projected on the continental level and strengthened by the support of Afro-Americans in the New World.10

From this African-centered perspective, “literary Pan-Africanism” should include the complex ways in which African writers and intellectuals struggle to lift the drastic effects of slavery, imperialism, and neocolonialism in their respective societies in terms that reflect their shared concerns with and interests in the past, present, and future of their continent. This struggle is inseparable from those of blacks of the diaspora since black Atlantic and continental African thoughts and histories have mutually influenced each other in modernity. As Ali Mazrui says, “The origins of modern intellectualism and the origins of Pan-Africanism are intertwined. We can imagine intellectualism without Pan-Africanism, but we cannot envisage Pan-Africanism without the intellectualization of the African condition.”11 This chapter contributes to the aforementioned conversations by exploring the roots of literary Pan-Africanism in the epics of Chaka and Sundiata. These narratives represent the two respective heroes’ personifications or disembodiments of Pan-Africanism through their life cycles and relationships with their particular families and kingdom.

Who was Chaka Zulu?

From the onset of his novel, Mofolo suggests that his epic of Chaka is steeped into literary pan-Africanism, as is apparent in his reference to various groups that composed South Africa during the early eighteenth century. Mofolo describes these groups, such as the Khoi, the Baswa, the Basotho, the Bakone, the Matebele, and the Sotho, among others, as “nations”12 rather than as tribes, thus countering European colonialist apppellations of colonized populations. One also notices early in his book that Mofolo is nostalgic of the times when South Africa was independent before the arrival of Europeans, thereby enjoying a sovereignty that was visible in its peoples’ ownership of and closeness to the land where
they lived. He writes: “The reader must understand that we are describing how the nations were situated long ago when the people were still settled upon the land.” It is interesting that Mofolo describes the original inhabitants of South Africa as “settled upon the land,” since this representation disrupts the conceptions of themselves as “settlers” of new lands that Europeans later used to lay claims on these populations’ nations.

In order to understand Mofolo’s book, one needs to first know who Chaka was. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chaka Zulu was born about 1787 and died in 1828. “Hailed as the greatest of African military leaders, Chaka created the Zulu empire in southern Africa.” Both historical records and oral traditions suggest that Chaka was special since the circumstances of his birth were extraordinary. First, “Zulu traditions relate the following: Conceived out of wedlock, Shaka was born to a Zulu chieftain, Senzangakhona, and an orphaned princess, Nandi, from a neighboring tribe, who quickly married before Shaka’s birth.” But, as legend also suggests, Chaka was born with supernatural qualities. According to Mofolo, when Chaka was born, a messenger told his father, “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.” Almost foretelling his son’s might, Senzangakhona himself sent a messenger to tell his overlord that “he had obtained a herdboy who would watch his herds, who would fight his wars, who would succeed him in the kingship.” Yet, Senzangakhona relinquished all these wishes as Nandi’s co-wives, especially one who gave birth to Chaka’s siblings, Mfokazana and Dingana, were about to tell the Great King Jobe that “Nandi was married when she was already heavy.” For fear of seeing Nandi, her “age-mates,” and himself killed by Jobe, “he [Senzangakhona] declared that Chaka was no longer heir to the kingship, and that Mfokazana would instead be his successor.”

Consequently, when Chaka was a young boy, he had to go into exile with his mother and leave his father’s town of Nobamba.

Later in the book, we are told that Nandi and Senzangakhona suffered from guilt, and Senzangakhona, fearing that his crime would be exposed, went to the length of plotting to kill his own son. Yet, if Senzangakhona had not committed this shameful deed in his youth, Chaka would have been at his home at Nobamba, a precious child, a child dearly loved by his father.

Destiny had a strange way of unfolding because, while he was forced out of his father’s town, Chaka learned to fight and fend for himself. He also learned to demonstrate Pan-Africanism through his might and his ability to help numerous people away from his homeland. Even if his father later successfully pleaded for his return to Ncube, another town where Chaka and his mother found refuge, Senzangakhona initially banished them from the city and had promised “that Nandi would never again set foot in Nobamba.” In this sense, Chaka’s epic follows the cycle of the hero’s exile.

Next, when he was still a young lad, Chaka killed a lion that was terrorizing Ncube and, later, was unscathed when his peers plotted to have him killed by a roaming hyena while he was watching them sleep in their huts. Even if Chaka was left alone by the hyena and killed a lion that attacked him, his age-mates kept beating and ridiculing him, reminding us of a similar treatment that Sundiata also received from his peers when he was crippled. Yet Chaka persevered while he was still a young lad, as his mother took him to a woman healer who gave him two medicines and ordered him to go to a river before prophesizing that “this child will receive blessings that exceed all expectations.” Chaka’s power is
connected to that of a Snake, since, “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, whereupon it casts its skin and begins to move about again.” Chaka’s new power scared his peers whom he killed or defeated with a stick. Chaka’s power stems from his bond with a snake god, as is apparent at the moment when he goes to the river in which a giant serpent of immeasurable length surrounds him, licks his face, and disappears soon before a mysterious voice from the reeds says:

Hail! Hail! This land is yours, child of my compatriot,
You shall rule over nations and their kings
You shall rule over peoples of diverse traditions
You shall even rule over the winds and the sea storms
And the pools of large rivers that run deep:
And all things shall obey you with unquestioning obedience,
And shall kneel at your feet!
O yes, oí! oí! Yet you must go by the right path.

The last stanza “Yet you must go by the right path” foreshadows the main irony in the rest of Chaka’s life since it became ridden with an insatiable thirst for blood that later transformed the victimized and once exiled child into one of the most vengeful and deadly attackers of many innocent people. Later, Chaka became the king of not only the Zulu empire but of all the other Southern African societies that he defeated or forced to submission.

**Chaka the savior**

However, despite its violent record, Chaka’s story is relevant to the study of literary Pan-Africanism since it reflects the black hero’s role as defender of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable that he played during most of his childhood. In Chaka’s myth, this role is apparent in the scene in which the hero shields a young woman of Ncube from a hyena’s attack. When the young woman rose up after she fainted, she yelled three times and she clung to Chaka, hanging on to him and kissing him, and doing all sorts of things, and she said: “I knew it could never be any one else but you, Chaka, savior of those in the grip of death, where all hope is lost!” This quotation shows the important role of protector of his people that Chaka, like Sundiata, also played from a young age. In a similar vein, the critic Kwame Ayivor states:

The growth of Chaka’s pre-eminence conforms to African epic traditions. The frequent fights with his fellow herdboys turn him into an awesome warrior. Chaka’s inherent epic attributes are further enhanced by the doctoring provided by the medicine woman from Bugane. The immediate outcome of this unusual growth and development is that, like Sundiata, Chaka emerges as the undisputed leader of the herdboys who used to brutalize him. He achieves this feat by beating all his peers into submission.

Chaka’s protection of the “young woman” and the village of Ncube from a hyena and, previously, from a lion, outweighs his beating of his mates (something that Sundiata also does). Chaka’s feat suggests that he did embody, in his early years, positive leadership qualities,
such as a devotion to his people’s safety, which probably explain the status of Pan-African hero that he occupies in African literature. Discussing this status, Carolyn Hamilton writes:

For [Donald] Burness, African literature is inescapably political, and he explored the way in which the figure of Chaka was used as a proud expression of Négritude. For Burness, Chaka was a mythical figure that could be reworked to explain the origin and destiny of a people.\textsuperscript{30}

It is from a similar perspective that Chaka has earned the status of a Pan-African symbol in black studies in spite of the fact that his massive killings of Zulus and members of other Southern African ethnic groups are undeniable. Chaka’s immeasurable violent acts are apparent when Appiah and Gates assert:

By 1823 Shaka had conquered all the present-day Natal, and left the area in ruin. His massive victories disrupted the clan structure of the interior, as clans destroyed each other in their attempts to escape encroaching Zulu. Known as the Mfecane (the Crushing), this period of warfare left 2 million dead and enabled the Great Boer Trek of the 1830s to colonize the area easily, as there were few to oppose them. Shaka was fascinated by the ways and artifacts of Europeans, whom he first encountered in 1824, and though he was convinced of the superiority of his own civilization, he allowed them to stay.\textsuperscript{31}

In this sense, Chaka’s Pan-Africanism can be considered as similar to that of world leaders whose calls for unity led to the colonization of other groups and the slaughter of their own people for egotistical reasons including a disillusioned sense of grandeur. In this sense, a critic perceives Chaka as an equivalent of Julius Caesar when he writes:

Both Caesar and Chaka evince a Rubiconesque ambition, an irreversible Macbeth-like vaulting ambition which overleaps itself and falls on the other side beyond one’s ends of being onto the ends of being in general. However, Caesar and Chaka exude differently this Rubiconesque ambition in such ways that make Caesar live and die a democratic dictator while Chaka lives and dies a demonic dictator.\textsuperscript{32}

Chaka’s dictatorship was also blatant when he grew up and became a leader who mercilessly subdued other chiefs of Southern Africa such as Mfokazana\textsuperscript{33} and Zwide, the latter whom he forced to run to his own death before he “ordered that all of Zwide’s people, men, women and children, be killed, and only the young men be spared.”\textsuperscript{34} According to Mofolo, “Then when he returned from chasing Zwide, he[Chaka] summoned together all Zwide’s young men who had escaped, and he incorporated them into his armies, rather than kill them.”\textsuperscript{35} Therefore, Chaka’s Pan-Africanism was largely ill-fated and dictatorial since it was based on the false notion that one could create unity through the decimation of one’s enemies, which is a philosophy that has hampered African continental political unity and economic and cultural integration since the dawn of independence. Africa’s development might have been delayed by decades due to the ethnic tensions that many of its leaders such as Idi Amin, Sekou Touré, Samuel Do, Charles Taylor, Mobutu Sese Seko, Muammar Khadafi, Yaya Jammeh, and many others fomented or exacerbated during their regimes to maintain dictatorial rules. The effects of such dictatorships resembled those of Chaka since they revealed the leaders’ false confections of Pan-African unity with the sowing of violence and discord for menial political gain. Though, at varying degrees, these leaders had Pan-Africanist
ambitions, they, like Chaka, ended up choking their people and suppressing their freedom. From this perspective, Chaka’s leadership veered away from Pan-Africanism when it represented violence, abuse, and totalitarianism against one’s people and imagined enemies.

**Isanusi: the other source of Chaka’s power**

In Mofolo’s book, one also learns that Chaka’s resolve to return to his homeland stemmed from a state in which he was inhabited by an uncontrollable thirst for vengeance that burned everyone in his way. Chaka’s sorcery resulted from the witch doctor Isanusi who, as a derivative of the snake god, agreed to vaccinate him with protective power only if he complied to a Machiavellian pact. Isanusi told Chaka:

> You must believe in me, I will never deceive you. I believe that you have, in a small way, seen the affairs of this world, that people live by favouritism and bias, by hatred and by strength; and now you too must part with mercy from this very day, because mercy devours its owner.  

Chaka’s life was ruled by Isanusi’s evil wisdom, leading him to kill randomly for power and thoughtlessly murder his lover Noliwa. After he was able to win the sympathy of the Bathethwa (also pronounced as Mthethwa) chief, Jobe Diginshwayo, who was the son of King Jobe, and was allowed to come to Diginshwayo to find refuge and protection from a life of aimless wandering, Chaka did not take long to impress the king with defeat of rival groups. But it did not take long before Chaka took over the kingdom of Zwide, Ncube, and that of Dingishwayo after he killed the latter ruler. Yet, when Isanusi told him that he could be a greater king if he sacrificed Noliwa, Jobe Dingeishwayo’s sister whom he married, Chaka blindly plotted her death. Later, Chaka further killed indiscriminately, including even his mother.

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 deeds. Firstly, the last spark of humanity still remaining in him was utterly and finally 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; because although he had been a cruel person even before this, he had remained a human being, his cruelty but a human weakness. But a man who has spilt the blood of someone like Noliwa, would understandably regard the blood of his subjects exactly as if it were no different from that of mere animals which we slaughter at will.

Therefore, at the center of Chaka’s myth lies the perversity of ruthless and ill-planned nationalism. When it is miscalculated, nationalism, despite its legitimate attempt to unify different ethnic communities into one large group or country, becomes perilous. In this sense, Mofolo raises serious doubt about Chaka’s nationalism by even suggesting that it is antithetical to Pan-Africanism. Chaka’s nationalism fits with a cultural vision which was based on Isanusi’s Machiavellian view of the world, rather than with a true and humane kind of cosmopolitan Pan-Africanism. Chaka’s problem was not the lack of a politically justifiable reason for him to create a sense of a nation in the Southern Africa of his time when different
groups needed to be brought together for their collective safety and ability to resist European invasion. As Vincent B. Khapoya argues in his book, *The African Experience: An Introduction* (1998), it even appears that Chaka weakened the power of other Southern African kingdoms, making it easier for Europeans to settle in this part of the African continent. In this sense, even if one must respect Chaka’s attempt to rename his acquired kingdom “Zulu! Mazulu!” (the sky, people of the sky),” since it could have been a laudable attempt to form a nation among different Southern African groups, one must lament the somber outcome of this Pan-Africanism.

Also, Chaka’s naming of his kingdom was driven by more than Pan-Africanism and cultural nationalism, because it was also motivated by ruthless imperial expansionism and the desire to strike fear in other people’s hearts. According to Mofolo’s account, when Isanusi mockingly laughed at the name Chaka proposed and asked why he chose it, the ruler said:

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, like Zwide.

It is ironic that Isanusi is Chaka’s first critic when he hears the name of his nation. It is also satirical that Mofolo writes: “All of them [including Isanusi’s servants] laughed once more, greatly surprised; and we too are surprised and wonder how great were the desires and the impudence in the heart of this Mokone that he compared himself to the greatness of the heavens! Zulu! Mazulu! Isanusi went away repeating that name over and over.” Therefore, Chaka had the kind of egocentric and self-aggrandizing impulse which led many future African leaders to betray their worthy goals by ending up perceiving themselves as more important than ordinary people they led. Chaka’s betrayal of Pan-Africanism stemmed from Isanusi’s influence which steered him from the urge “to go by the right path” that the snake god gave to the future leader in the river of Bokone. In his dealings with Chaka, Isanusi corrupted the snake god’s message by leading the future king to embody evil and mercilessness rather than good and compassion.

**Sundiata’s Pan-Africanism**

Like Chaka’s, Sundiata’s epic is also permeated with literary Pan-Africanism because it is a text about the importance of predestination, exile, personal sacrifice, and unity as means of overcoming oppression. However, unlike Chaka’s, Sundiata’s epic celebrates these virtues in the main persona’s sustained and positive actions and ideals. In comparison to Chaka, Sundiata was a good and decent person who grew up to be a strong, kind, and fair leader, unlike his foil who turned out as a wicked and impartial dictator. By contrast, Sundiata was a conciliatory Pan-African leader rather than a dictatorial one. His method of leadership was based on negotiation and diplomacy instead of torture, force, fear, and intimidation.

**Similar trajectories between Chaka and Sundiata**

As in Chaka’s case, the beginning of the fulfillment of Sundiata’s fate unfolds through the intervention of witch doctors. In a similar vein, like Chaka’s, Sundiata’s manifest destiny unravels through the involvement of many diviners. Also, like Chaka, Sundiata was born from a woman who was likely to be despised due to her supposed social status. Like his
South African equivalent, Sundiata was also brought to the world in extraordinary circumstances in which supernatural forces played an important part.

In Sundiata’s story, the hero’s birth was foretold by two brother hunters, Oulamba and Oulani, who once came to King Naré Maghan Kon Fatta with a “young girl” from “Do” that they brought to him as a “present,” because they “deemed her worthy to be a king’s wife.” This woman became the king’s spouse and Sundiata’s mother.

Yet the history of Sogolon Kedjou also stemmed from a past in which a hunter from Sangaran once met King Naré Maghan and, upon the invitation of the sovereign’s courtier, agreed to do a divination for the leader. Through his reading of cowries, the hunter foretold a new dawn for the kingdom of Mali through the birth of a child. He said,

Oh king, the world is full of mystery, all is hidden and we know nothing but what we can see. The silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed—that which defies the tempest weighs in its germ no more than a grain of rice. Kingdoms are like trees; some will be silk-cotton trees, others will remain dwarf palms and the powerful silk-cotton tree will cover them with its shade. Oh, who can recognize in the little child the great king to come? The great comes from the small; truth and falsehood have both suckled at the same breast. Nothing is certain, but, sire, I can see two strangers over there coming towards your city.

Then, the hunter told the king, “King of Mali, destiny marches with great strides, Mali is about to emerge from the night. Nianiba is lighting up, but what is this light that comes from the east.” Next, the diviner predicted the arrival of two hunters to the king’s city with a woman. The way in which the hunter described the woman and the child she would bear for the king suggests a form of rhetorical literary Pan-Africanism which is similar to the one that is expressed in how Senzangakhona’s encounters with Nandi is portrayed. This pattern is signified in the prophetic way in which Chaka’s birth was announced as a new dawn for the kingdoms of South Africa that later became parts of the Zulu empire. Like Chaka’s, Sundiata’s birth is foretold like the birth of a prophet. Evidence from either the epics or outside research suggests that the mothers of both Chaka and Sundiata were not ordinary in that they came from royal families and had incredible strength. Discussing one aspect of the “epic hero,” Ayivor writes: “Chaka’s father is King Senzangakhona of the Zulus, and his mother is Princess Nandi, the daughter of Prince Bhebhe of the Langeni.”

In Sundiata’s epic, one also finds a direct royal lineage of the hero’s parents. Early in the narrative, “The buffalo of Do,” who appears in human form as Sogolon’s mother, tells the two hunters who give her food, to kill her in exchange for their generosity with the condition that they must choose the woman who is called “Sogolon kedjou, or Sogolon Kondouto, because she is a hunchback,” when the King of Do, her brother, recompenses them by asking them to select a wife from his town. Sundiata’s birth from his mother, Sogolon kedjou, was like Chaka’s delivery from Nandi. Both beginnings were predicted in epic terms, as the starting point of a new era for not just Africa, but the world at large. Way before Sundiata’s birth, the hunter from Sangaran had told Gnankouman Doua (Naré Maghan’s griot and Balla Fasséké’s father):

I see two hunters coming to your city; they have come from afar and a woman accompanies them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly, she is hideous, she bears on her back a disgusting hump. Her monstrous eyes seem to have been merely laid on her face, but,
mystery of mysteries, this is the woman you must marry, sire, for she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal for ever. The child will be the seventh star, the seventh conqueror of the earth. He will be more mighty than Alexander.  

This quotation suggests the larger-than-life stature that Sundiata was predicted to have brought to Mali. The number 7 is also relevant since, as is indicated in the epic, it was at the age of 7 that Sundiata was able to walk. Moreover, this number is important in many world religions and cultures, especially in Judeo-Christianity and Islam where it has various positive meanings.  

Another similarity between the epics of Chaka and Sundiata is that the latter text also reflects the moment when the main hero’s awakening is depicted in supernatural terms as a new day not just for him but also for his entire nation. In Chaka’s epic, the awakening took place during a meeting with Isanusi, his second witch doctor, who transformed him from an innocent person to an ill-willed one. Isanusi lured Chaka to devote himself to the power of the snake god and get supernatural powers over his enemies on the condition that he, Chaka, gave up mercy. When Chaka begged Isanusi to “make me into a great king, one who is independent, to whom all lesser kings owe allegiance,” Isanusi, the doctor, did many procedures, including cutting a part of Chaka’s hair-line and stuffing it into his forehead, and giving him “the medicine of kingship which would make all those who saw him tremble and kneel before him.”  

This medicine was very powerful because, according to Isanusi, “when he [Chaka] was angry, the faint-hearted would die from fright. His command would be taken so seriously that, if the one commanded delayed in carrying it out, others would tear him apart even while Chaka kept his peace.” It is important to note that Isanusi acted as a responsible and neutral doctor throughout his conversations with Chaka and did not force any ideas on him. He just proposed them and told Chaka what he needed to do in order to have the power from the snake god. But he let Chaka know that having such medicine would take away his free will.  

Then, in great suspense, Isanusi completed his conquest of Chaka’s heart by dangling in front of his eyes the glimmering promise of glorious kingship if he chose to take, by his own free will, “a medicine associated with the spilling of blood, with killing.” Mofolo writes:  

“It is extremely evil, but it is also extremely good. Choose!” The doctor placed matters in Chaka’s hands; he told him, without hiding anything from him, that that medicine was truly evil, then he, for his part, stood to one side so that Chaka could act according to his wish.  

As soon as Chaka said, “I want it” and, thus, had “deliberately chosen death instead of life,” Isanusi took him to a “tree in Bokone,” vaccinated him with its deadly blood mixed with “snake poisons,” and gave him an ointment with which “he must anoint himself” every time he returned from the river. As soon as Chaka took the medicine, Isanusi, following a casual conversation on the reasons why he is called by that name, suggested that Chaka’s decision to take the medicine finally constituted a perpetual loss of free will and a permanent pact with “death.” First, the healer insisted that Chaka must call him “Isanusi” rather than “doctor,” because, he said, “[Isanusi] that is the name I use in addressing the dead, and it is by that name that they know me.” Therefore, Isanusi meant that Chaka had become as part of “the dead” once he took the medicine, although he was physically alive. Thus, the snake god had already owned the soul and free will that Chaka could regain only through
death. Dismissing any doubts Chaka might have had about this pact that would lead the Zulu King to the conquest of the power of Dingishwayo, Isanusi told the future king:

One important matter which I want you to understand well, is that the great king who once visited you at the river is a person who loves war; if you do not spill blood, he will not be pleased with you. Also the medicine with which I have vaccinated you is a medicine of blood; if you do not spill much blood, it will turn against you and kill you instead. Your sole purpose should be to kill without mercy, and thus clear the path that leads to the glory of your kingship."

This quotation suggests how Chaka’s pact with Isanusi and, by extension, with the snake god, sealed his life and took his free will. From the moments he took Isanusi’s two medicines, Chaka realized that he was unalterably conditioned to spread death and destruction for his own sake, which explains the tragic things that he did towards his family, people, and those who ran into him. To call Chaka “dictator” is an understatement because, as Mofolo’s novel suggests, he committed every imaginable atrocity, sometimes leading one to wonder if such a cruel leader ever existed in South Africa.

**Sundiata**

Like Chaka’s, Sundiata’s epic reflects the trauma of a young child who was ushered by the forced exile and rejection of his mother to return to his homeland although, in the case of the Malian hero, the ordeals did not take place while the future emperor’s father was alive. Otherwise, the experiences were quite similar. Like Nandi, Sogolon Kedjou (Sundiata’s mother) was forced to leave the royal compound due to a cowife’s jealousy, rivalry, and cruelty towards her. Sundiata’s power arose from the pain his mother suffered and supernatural circumstances that foretold his rise into a hero. For instance, we learn that Sundiata’s power might have come from the fact that he was Sogolon’s son and that his mother’s mother was the Buffalo of Do that nobody could kill without her willing submission and collaboration. This power transferred to Sogolon Kedjou whose marriage King Naré Maghan could not consummate without scaring the new wife’s indomitable spirit.

Besides, like Chaka’s, Sundiata’s birth was an extraordinary event accentuated with natural phenomena indicating the specialness of the moment. In addition to rambling “thunder,” “swift lightning,” a “strong wind,” one notes how “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 Naré Maghan that he was the father of a boy.” A further parallel between Sundiata and Chaka is noticeable in the fact that when he was born, the future Emperor of Mali faced daily humiliations from his mother’s co-wives. Also, like Chaka, Sundiata was teased daily by his childhood peers.

Yet Sundiata’s predicament was special since it also had to do with a physical challenge. Sundiata’s childhood suffering also stemmed from the abuse of peers due to an infirmity that prevented him to walk for years after he was born. His mother suffered the most as Sassouma Bérété, her co-wife, attempted to make her constantly irate. Sassouma “was quite happy and snapped her fingers at Sogolon, whose child was still crawling on the ground.”

It was during such trials that a miracle occurred in the Kingdom of Niani. The miracle’s occurrence is anticipated in one of the most meditative scenes in African literature. The scene is in the passages when Sundiata sits with his back on a hut and his face looking in the sun’s direction. Niane writes: “Mari Djata had finished eating and, dragging himself along on
his legs, he came and sat under the wall of the hut for the sun was scorching. What was he thinking about? He alone knew.”  

This passage is one of the most memorable literary Pan-Africanisms since it is revisited in many African literary writings and films when characters are torn between various poles and struggle to define themselves, return to their homeland, or reconnect with their past. This moment is also a precursor to those various scenes permeating African literary and visual texts in which main characters are torn between the difficulty of knowing whether to save their people or themselves in the midst of chaos.

Another similarity between the two epics is visible in how, Just like in Chaka’s case, Sundiata’s father participated in his and his mother’s painful lives by demanding or allowing that the mother be expelled from her royal compound. According to the Griot Mamadou Kouyaté, “The disheartened king debarred Sogolon from his house and she lived in semi-disgrace for a while.”  

Soon after the king Naré Maghan died perplexed and aggrieved without seeing his son walk, Sassouma Bérété not only further removed Sogolon and her son from the royal compound but later forced them to leave the Kingdom of Niani. However, as the narrator suggests, it is Sogolon who made this decision from a legitimate fear that Sassouma would hurt Sundiata’s brother, “Manding Bory, the son of [his father] Naré Maghan’s third wife, Namandjé, [who] had no gift of sorcery,” and his sister Sogolon Kolonkan.  

Thus, Sundiata’s fate was sealed by a desire to restore his and his mother’s dignity, which was a drive that one notices more in William C. Faure’s film version of Chaka than in Mofolo’s novel.

Another contrast between Chaka and Sundiata is that the latter’s Pan-Africanism was mostly based on cooperation rather than division and abuse. Sundiata’s Pan-Africanism is visible early on when he rescued his mother from her co-wife, not for personal gain, but for his whole community’s prosperity and moral lesson. Sundiata’s Pan-Africanism is further apparent during this mythical and legendary scene in which his griot, Balla Fasséké, narrates how the future king lifted the baobab tree that his mother wanted and placed it in front of her home in Niani. Balla Fasséké said:

Room, room, make room!
The lion has walked;
Hide antelopes,
Get out of his way.  

This passage is also a form of literary Pan-Africanism since it suggests a ritual in which a griot exhorted the people to stand aside so that a dignitary, such as a king or queen, could walk in. A similar passage is perceptible in Ousmane Sembene’s film, Ceddo, in which the character of the Jaraaf (played by Oumar Gueye) walked in and out as he provided diplomatic and oratory praises to the King, Daali, (played by the venerable Makhouradia Gueye), who was about to speak to the people.  

Once the King sat on his throne, the Jaraaf in Ceddo told him in a tone that is reminiscent of Chaka’s bloody conception of royalty:

Daali, ton people t’écoute.
Ton régime est voulu par Allah.
Ces ceddo qui refusent d’être convertis, sont destinés à bruler en enfer.
Ces gens, esclaves du trône, ont osé porter la main
Sur Dior Yacine, la Linguee, ta fille ainée.
Daali ne soit pas magnanime, ils ont osé te défier.
Daali, décide, ordonne et la terre sera rouge, aujourd’hui de leur sang
[Daali, your people are listening to you.  
Your rule is wanted by Allah.  
These ceddo, who refuse to be converted, are bound to burn in hell.  
These people, slaves of the throne, have dared to lay hand  
on Dior Yacine, the Linguee, who is your eldest daughter.  
Daali, do not be magnanimous; they have dared to defy you.  
Daali, decide, give an order, and the ground will be red today, with their blood].

The word “Jaraaf” is from the Wolof language of Senegal where, as Francois G. Richard suggests, it meant dignitaries “who were generally chosen from the lineage of the village founder and acted essentially as village heads.” The Jaraaf in Ceddo has the same roles as a diplomat and an intermediary between a ruler and his people that griots traditionally filled in Senegal. While Jaraafs were supposed to bring good omens to a town, the one in Ceddo foreshadows the kinds of brutality that besieged West African kingdoms when Islam, Christianity, and the Atlantic slave trade crippled the continent by turning it into a source of human beings who were forcefully and inhumanely taken abroad as slaves.

Rhetorically, the passage from Ceddo is also important because it reflects a form of reverence toward a royalty, resonating with the literary Pan-Africanism that is also apparent in the manner in which the thirteenth century Malian griot, Balla Fasséké, exhorted his future legitimate king, Sundiata, to action. Balla Fasséké told the rising warrior:

Take your bow, Simbon,  
Take your bow and let us go.  
Take your bow, Sogolon Djata.

Yet, unlike the Jaraaf in Ceddo, who expected a ruler to simply slaughter those who defied him or her, Balla Fasséké valued respect for human life. Balla Fasséké’s exhortations did not hint at the possibility of killing those who defied a member of Niani’s royal family by usurping their rights. The difference between Balla Fasséké and the Jaraaf is a microscopic representation of the contrast between a Chaka-like leadership, which is based on terror and the subjugation and enslavement of the poor, and that of Sundiata, which is based on the liberation and empowerment of the ordinary people.

Sundiata’s ability to walk brought good omen to his mother Sogolon whose shame and humiliation from Sassouma Bérété’s action were somewhat halted the day her son walked. That day, Sogolon praised her son and God, saying,

Oh day, what a beautiful day,  
Oh day, day of joy;  
Allah Almighty, you never created a finer day.  
So my son is going to walk!

From that point on, Sundiata performed a series of actions which, altogether, represent the kind of good leadership that Pan-Africanism epitomizes. Although he and his close family and Niani were persecuted before his father’s passing, Sundiata remained a calm, yet resolute, leader who brought various armies to his support in an attempt to recapture his kingdom that Soumaoro Kanté, the Sosso king, had invaded during his exile. For about three years, Sundiata and his family traveled to distant lands, ending in the Kingdom of Ghana where
the ruler and his family welcomed them. During that time, Sundiata grew into a more mature man and was appointed “Kan-Koro-Sigui, the king’s viceroy, and in the king’s absence it was he who governed” Ghana. Later, Sundiata was able to rally the support of many kingdoms and armies that joined him in his successful war against Soumaoro who had conquered Niani. These warriors include Fran Kamara, who Balla Fasséké praises as the King of Tabon “whose iron arm can split ten skulls at a time.” As the storyteller says,

The griot’s words made Fran Kamara leap up. Sword in hand and mounted on his swift steed he came and stood before Sundiata and said, ‘Maghan Sundiata, I renew my oath to you in the sight of all the Mandingoes gathered together. I pledge myself to conquer or to die by your side. Mali will be free or the smiths of Tabon will be dead.”

Then Balla Fasséké turned to Fran Kamara and his sofas (soldiers) as well as to the King of Sibi, who, like other warriors, “fell beside Sundiata” to declare their readiness to help him recapture Niani and Mali from Soumaoro’s invasion. “Balla Fasséké mentioned all the chiefs by name and they all performed great feats; then the army, confident in its leadership, left Sibi.”

The leadership one finds in Sundiata’s epic is one that opposes the Chaka-like management style which consists of intimidating others and forcing them to submission. Unlike Chaka’s, Sundiata’s leadership epitomizes true Pan-Africanism since it is founded on the effort to bring Africa’s various strong forces to help the downtrodden who are forsaken by dictators. By contrast, Chaka’s leadership is akin to that of Soumaoro, the king who had stolen Balla Fasséké from Sundiata, compelling the Malian griot to extol him as follows: “All hail, you who wear clothes of human skin./I salute you, you who sit on the skins of kings.” These praises reveal Balla Fasséké’s indirect representation of Soumaoro as a king who had no respect for human lives. Soumaoro appeared as a Chaka-like king who had made a contract with the devil, which allowed him to defeat his enemies and be almost impossible to kill until a person with good sorcery like Sundiata defied him. The good sorcery that allowed Sundiata to kill Soumaoro was the spur of a white cock, which Sundiata placed in an arrow with which he fatally shot the Sosso king. But Sundiata would have been unable to know this secret without the help of his half-sister, Nana-Triban, whom Soumaoro had stolen from their royal compound after he had invaded Niani and forced their brother Dankaran Touman into submission. It was Nana-Triban who had told Sundiata that “The cock’s spur was the Tana of Soumaoro” and had urged him to “try to get near to him” in battle. We see here an exemplary form of Pan-Africanism in which the black woman served as a family counselor, a foreign advisor, and a military strategist. Thanks to Nana-Triban’s “tana” [secret] and advice, Sundiata was able to throw an arrow that grazed Soumaoro’s shoulder, weakening him to the point when he disappeared in a cave leading to a river and was never seen again. The toppling of Soumaoro’s autocracy is a form of Pan-Africanism that has historical resonance, such as the diplomatic and unified ways in which many African leaders sometimes put their efforts together to restore peace and order in the continent.

The epics of Chaka Zulu and Sundiata Keita are classical African literary works that deserve to be revisited due to the important lessons they teach about the virtues of Pan-Africanism. Through Chaka’s epic, one learns about the hero’s initial incarnation of Pan-Africanism through his defense of his community and his resolve to use his experience from forced exile as a way to restore his right to return to his parents’ homelands. Yet, as the novel progresses, Chaka abandoned such Pan-Africanism, preferring to deploy divisions and brutality as Machiavellian means to crush his opponents and gain power by might rather than by right.
In contrast to Chaka’s, Sundiata’s epic reveals a hero’s steady embrace of Pan-Africanism. From childhood to adulthood, Sundiata remained a sturdy individual and leader who used his natural strength to help his family and the larger community while preparing to claim his right to return to his parents’ homelands. Yet, unlike Chaka, Sundiata never abandoned the Pan-African ideals that made him a protector of ordinary people. Sundiata never used force and violence against them, therefore embodying a consultative and inclusive form of Pan-African leadership which was a salient literary Pan-Africanism. The contrasts between Chaka and Sundiata are lessons that contemporary Africans can revisit to turn the tides of neocolonialism and mere pursuit of power. Africans can draw from the two epics’ wisdom to develop Pan-Africanist ways of resisting tyranny and surviving for the benefit of all without recourse to unnecessary violence. Doing so will allow modern Africans, especially leaders, to avoid the ongoing neocolonialism that enables the West to continue to dictate Africa’s political, economic, and social futures, development, and security.

Notes
5 Temple, Literary Pan-Africanism, 4.
6 Temple, Literary Pan-Africanism, 5.
13 Mofolo, Chaka, 3.
16 Mofolo, Chaka, 6.
17 Mofolo, Chaka, 6.
18 Mofolo, Chaka, 9–10.
19 Mofolo, Chaka, 11.
20 Mofolo, Chaka, 34.
21 Mofolo, Chaka, 11.
23 Mofolo, Chaka, 27.
24 Mofolo, Chaka, 14.
25 Mofolo, Chaka, 15.
26 Mofolo, Chaka, 15.
27 Mofolo, Chaka, 24.
33 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 77.
34 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 95.
35 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 96.
36 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 41.
38 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 101–102, 127
39 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 150.
40 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 128.
42 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 103.
43 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 103.
44 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 103.
50 Ayivor, “Thomas Mopoku Mofolo’s ‘Inverted Epic Hero,’” 50.
54 Guy Winch writes:
   In the Old Testament the world was created in six days and God rested on the seventh, creating the basis of the seven-day-week we use to this day. In the New Testament the number seven symbolizes the unity of the four corners of the Earth with the Holy Trinity. The number seven is also featured in the Book of Revelation (seven churches, seven angels, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven stars). The Koran speaks of seven heavens and Muslim pilgrims walk around the Kaaba in Mecca (Islam’s most sacred site) seven times. In Hinduism there are seven higher worlds and seven underworlds, and in Buddhism the newborn Buddha rises and takes seven steps.
55 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 41.
56 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 42.
57 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 42–43.
58 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 43.
59 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 43.
60 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 43.
61 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 43–44.
63 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 45.
64 Niane, *Sundiata*, 12.
66 Niane, *Sundiata*, 16.
68 Niane, *Sundiata*, 16.
Bibliography


