

LITERATURE AS CELEBRATION: THE ZULU (*EMPEROR SHAKA*) AND MANDINGO (*SUNDIATA*) EPIC

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between literature and society has long been recognised. In light of this, African literature is viewed as partly a celebration and partly an expression of African values. Literature set in the past is to some degree seen as an attempt to unearth, convey and uphold socio-economic, political and religious values of the time. Using the Afrocentricity theory and epic texts, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Niane, 1965) and *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (Kunene, 1979), the article posits that a study of such epic texts indeed offers a glimpse of the people's philosophy of life and their values.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many Africans hold the view that African literature is a major vehicle through which African cultural values are transmitted. p'Bitek (1973) writes that, like laughter and crying, literature is first and foremost an expressive activity, expressing among other things, African values.

The article thus comparatively discusses epic texts, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Niane, 1965) and *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (Kunene, 1979), with the intention of unearthing the cultural values conveyed and celebrated by the two ethnic groups. It seeks to show that there are broad affinities among ethnic groups of Africa which will make it prudent to talk meaningfully of African values or civilisations. Focus is on the epic for a number of reasons. First, it is considered part of the larger body of African oral tradition which Chinweizu et al (1980) argue to be the incontestable

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reservoirs of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of the African thought and imagination. In other words, African oral literature expresses African worldview as evaluated by the participants in the culture. Second, the epic provides a lot of cultural information about a people. Biebuyck (1972, 257) observes that an epic constitutes an encyclopedic inventory of the most diverse aspects of a people's culture. In addition, a look into the epic helps show that our conception of literature is broader than presumed by Western scholarship in particular and also brings to the fore a genre that scholars of literature hardly pay attention to.

In this article the focus is on celebrated social, economic and political values. Values will here be understood to mean shared ideas and standards that a people believe must be upheld under practically all circumstances. The distinction between social, economic and political values is for convenience because in reality African values cannot be neatly delineated and understood in isolation from one another. The African world is one, not divided.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article grounds its discussion in the Afrocentricity theory. Propounded by Asante (1990, 1998, 2003, 2007), the theory underscores that Western ways of looking at reality do not satisfactorily illuminate African experiences and worldview. This is because such Western ways are laden with assumptions and presumptions about Africa and her diverse cultural heritage. The theory posits that 'all African phenomena, activities and ways of life [are] to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint and worldview of Africans' (Asante 2007, 29). In other words, a work of art by an African writer, conveying African experiences and meant for an African audience should be analysed using a theory by, for and about Africans, and such a theory is Afrocentricity. Thus, using the theory allows for the two epic texts to be analysed from an insider-participant perspective. This leaves little room for distortion of the values of the people in question.

3. SOCIAL VALUES

The epics convey African people's attitudes towards the female gender, as well as towards oneness and individualism.

3.1. Women as human

Kunene, in *Emperor Shaka* and Niane in *Sundita*, both show that the Zulu and Mandingo have great respect for humanity in general, and womenfolk in particular. Like male beings, women are treated as human; they are respected, obeyed and accorded positions of authority.

In Zulu life, women own property and their ownership is acknowledged and respected. Nandi and Princess Mkhabayi, for example, each has a capital. Nandi also possesses leopard skins and ornaments bequeathed by queens and kings of many lands who seek favours and protection from her son, Shaka. Queen Mantantisi has many cattle at her capital. In addition, women are respected for their sense of authority and wisdom. Princess Mkhabayi is shown to be very wise. Her mind is said to have equaled those of ten men of Assembly. The feared Zulu leader, Shaka, is shown consulting her about many issues. It is she who advises him on ancestors and what they expect in leadership, and she schools him through tales about the ancestors. This shows that women never wait to be dictated to by men; they are independent thinkers whose ideas are sought after and respected. Mkhabayi is shown as a fount of advice and ideas for many.

Zulu women hold leadership positions as rulers and commanders of the army in battles. Queen Mantantisi is both a ruler and an army commander. Of her, Mdlaka, the Zulu warrior says (1979, 69):

She fights to protect her throne

She has conquered many nations

Fighting and leading her own battles

She has subdued the fierce nation of the Fukengs

She has put to flight a segment of the proud Kwena nation

She has routed the peaceful settlements of the Khwakhwa

She even conquered the army of the great Moshoeshe himself

Only the Hlubis of Mpangazitha defeated her

Queen Mantantisi is shown to be brave, powerful, hardly conquerable, famous, respected, feared and imposing. She is both a ruler and a great warrior. Her personality refutes the colonialist thinking that women would be always ruled by men, disrespected, marginalised and that they never participated in war. It further refutes feminist thinking, namely that the African way of life limited and condemned the women to domestic and less influential roles, with their main staging arena being the kitchen. Instead, Zulu women, just like their male counterparts, are authoritative, fearsome, respected, listened to and deified. The position of leadership held by Queen Mantantisi vindicates Hudson-Weems' (1993) observation that African men and women are flexible role-players. In other words, roles in African cosmology are not fixed. Instead, they are flexible to the extent that positions held by men can also be held by women.

Those who ill-treat or abuse women are castigated by society. When Senzangakhona denies both Nandi and her children, some people banish her from their homes and make sarcastic comments such as 'Nandi gave birth to an animal', and 'Cow's children'.

Nandi and her children are reduced to mere beasts and are denied hospitality, kindness or generosity. Life changes later on and those who mocked her are exposed to public humiliation. This is because they had dehumanised Nandi and her children. The Zulu's worldview is guided by the philosophy that a human being is a human being and so cannot be treated like an animal or a dog. Animals normally sleep in the open regardless of the weather conditions and are scolded in the worst ways. Women, being human, cannot be treated as such and so the perpetrators of inhumanity end up being punished.

Among the Mandingo, Niane too shows that women enjoy great respect and space. Sossouma Berete has personal possessions. To the women she hires to kill Sundiata, she promises bags of granary, rice, cows and calves. The promise she makes shows that such women have the power and freedom to dispose of their possessions without having to consult men. Thus property ownership among women is not something that was fought for and introduced by feminists, but has been part of the African way of life. In addition to owning property, Mandingo women have authority: their word is listened to and obeyed. When the king Nare Maghan dies, Sossouma's son, Dankaran Touman, inherits the throne. However, it is actually Sossouma Berete who advises him on many things. She urges him to kill his step brother Sundiata so as to safeguard his throne, and the King takes the word seriously. Luckily, Sundiata escapes the planned death. Despite the fact that the advice she gives her son is negative, and that it later brings societal criticism on her head, it is clear that women are obeyed; they have platforms to speak. Sundiata also respects the three old women sent to test him and, if need be, kill him. The women are impressed by the respect and honour he shows them, and they see no reason to kill him. Sundiata respects them, not because he knows that they have been sent to test him (for he does not), but because they have to be respected for both their age and that they are human like any other. Thus, both the Zulu and Mandingo celebrate and respect humanity; a human being should be treated as such. There is no marginalisation and oppression of womenfolk. Writing on Ghana, which was part of Old Mali, Armah explains thus: 'Our way is ignorant of women ruling men; knows nothing of men dominating women' (1973, 26). In the two ethnic groups, women are respected and accorded platforms for self-expression. This is important, especially in a world view where men and women have roles and responsibilities accorded to each; as such each gender needs to be respected for the contribution it makes to the survival of humankind.

3.2. Unity vis-a-vis individualism

To the Zulu and Mandingo the collective spirit overrides, but does not obliterate individual tendencies. In whatever they do, they emphasise collectivism, oneness and brotherhood, leaving room also for individual distinction. However, such individualism is only tolerated if it is for the good of society. Unity among the two ethnic groups is cultivated and maintained through many institutions; among them, family, marriage, friendship and totemism or claniship.

The Zulu family plays a unifying role. Members of the family see and regard themselves as one. They assist and even feel for each other. When his brother Manashukumbela dies in battle, Ndo comes and weeps bitterly by his side. When his mother Nandi falls ill, Shaka is very depressed, and his grief also affects his sister, Princess Nomchoba. Thus the family makes it easy for feelings of joy, pain and sorrow to be shared among members. In addition to the family, friendship also unifies people among the Zulu. The Zulu clan has friendship ties with the Ngwane state, and to maintain these bonds, the two states again establish marriage bonds which necessitate a constant flow of emissaries between them. They also hold feasts and festivals in which they commune together, cementing their bonds. Friendship and marriage make it unthinkable for people to nurse grudges or instigate conflict since they see and regard each other as one. Throughout his life, King Shaka considers Zinhlando of the Mkhize clan, Mgobhozi and Moshoeshoe as his close friends and a threat to any one of them is considered a threat to them all.

Solidarity and oneness also exists among clan members. Opland observes that clan solidarity is a vital element in African society, binding man to living relatives (1983, 120). Members of the clan feel close to each other for they have a common ancestry and identity. Clan praises even bring people together, praising them as one. Members of a clan normally show solidarity against an enemy. The amaLangeni clan wages war against the Zulu clan over the ill-treatment of their daughter, Nandi and her children. The Mthethwa clan groups together against Pungashe of the Buthelezi clan. Although the Zulu emphasise oneness, individuality is tolerated, but only if it is for the good of society. Thus, whilst clan praises belong to all members of that clan, they are recited for individuals who would have distinguished themselves in acts that are for the good of society. Because of this, the Zulu accord individual members praise names for having distinguished themselves. Shaka is referred to as the lion, alluding to personal traits like bravery, strength and fierceness. In the Zulu war against Zwide, people compose songs praising all warriors, and individuals whose efforts bring victory (Kunene, 1979: 290):

General Mdlaka was the theme of many songs and legends

For his skill in battle he was nicknamed Shaka's spirit

It was said he laughed as he fought in battle

Of all commanders, none inspired to greater acts of courage than he

Boy detachments swore by his name.

Mdlaka is being praised for his individual efforts which led to the defeat of the enemy and the social well-being of the people. He therefore gets a praise name for his exploits. To be labelled Shaka's spirit is to be greatly honoured. Thus Mdlaka's individual traits earn him praises, for the traits are for the good of society. This auger with African philosophy that a finger is important in as far as it contributes to the well-being of the whole body (Chigwedere 1996, 47).

The Mandingo too treasure unity and co-operation of individual members. Family, friendship and marriage are unifying institutions as well. At Sundiata's birth, close relatives are granted access to see the child, who is one of their own. In the African world view, it is these relatives who help raise the child in line with societal dictates, because it takes the whole village to raise a child. Among the Mandingo, like among other Africans, children are reared by their 'mothers', that is all the wives (of the family, clan or tribe), not just the mothers themselves, as well as by their grandmothers, aunts and other female relatives (Vansina 1976, 2--3). Being brothers, Sundiata and Manding Bory help and feel for each other as well. Manding Bory helps Sundiata in his later battle against Soumaoro the King of Soso, seeing the danger to Sundiata as a danger to him too. Sundiata gets further assistance from his boyhood friends, Fran Kamara and Kamandjin, showing that friendship really bonds people. Marriage also bonds Sundiata and his subjects to the people of Do, Sundiata's maternal relatives. What brings the people together is that to them, like other African ethnic groups, marriage is not an individual contract, but a contract between clan and clan, tribe and tribe, family and family (Fanon 1959, 114). The people from Do help Sundiata in the war against Soumaoro because they see him as their nephew who cannot be left to perish. It is the collective spirit that liberates the people from the harsh grip and influence of Soumaoro. Yet, despite the supremacy of the collective efforts, the Mandingo also acknowledge individual capability if it is for the good of humanity. Sundiata earns individual recognition for his exploits in battle, both in Mema and against Soumaoro. He is praised for being wise enough to gather the necessary information about Soumaoro's powers and for drafting a strategy that leads to the downfall of Soumaoro.

Thus the Zulu and Mandingo people's approach to collectivism and individualism may be equated to the concept expressed by a Ghanaian proverb (Gyekye 1988, 12):

A clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appears huddled together, *but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached.*

Seen from afar, trees are a cluster and appear crowded together, but from a short distance, they stand individually. The proverb stresses the social reality that the individual, though in a group, is not completely absorbed or overshadowed by it. In other words, though the Zulu and Mandingo emphasise oneness, there is room for individuals to distinguish themselves in whatever they do, as long as such distinction is in line with societal ideals. Thus communalism does not obliterate or squeeze out individuality (ibid). Such communalism is not antithetical to individual expression or personal achievement; oneness and individualism co-exist and give each other room.

4. ECONOMIC VALUES

The Zulu and Mandingo celebrate values like hospitality, hard work and self-sufficiency. Invariably, meanness and laziness are excoriated.

4.1. Generosity, hospitality and kindness

Kunene in *Emperor Shaka* shows that the communal spirit among the Zulu extends to include the sharing of economic possessions. As such, values like generosity, kindness and sympathy are praised whilst meanness and greed are lampooned. When Shaka excels in the battle against Pungashe, Dingisiwayo gives him cattle as gift. Shaka shares the cattle with members of his iziChwe regiment. His argument is that it is not he alone who should benefit from the gift because the victory over Pungashe is from unified efforts of the whole regiment. This he does regardless of the fact that he does not have many herds. He demonstrates that he is not self-centred or greedy. When he later becomes king, Shaka launches a campaign meant to cultivate the spirit of sharing economic possessions among his people. He tests them to establish whether they are willing to share, or give without complaining. Ultimately, he finds an old man who is bereft of wealth because he loves to share. Shaka gives him many herds of cattle as a form of praise and challenges others to follow his example. With this, sharing of possessions reaches great heights in Zululand (1979, 189):

Many now desired the company of strangers

Even the poor received large gifts of beasts and grain

The Zulu share without expecting anything in return. They even share with the poor, from whom they expect no material benefit. This is why they even give out cattle and land to white strangers who come to them. To them, land is communally owned and so no one should be denied access to it. It is this world view which causes the Zulu conflict with the white strangers who are keen on hoarding wealth. Hlambamanzi of Xhosaland tells Shaka that in his home area, the whites have grabbed land and stolen cattle from the shepherds. Surprised, Shaka contrasts the whites with the Zulu, saying (1979, 379):

In Zululand, it is not often a man thinks of his wealth

Indeed it is heinous to hoard...

But to the strangers, wealth surpasses bonds of kinship.

Zulu philosophy is that oneness should permeate all endeavours, and so no one should starve amidst plenty. The Zulu place emphasis on the well-being of human life and not accumulation of wealth. Shaka's character contrasts European claims about him. Byrant (1949, 429) wrote, 'Shaka was a greedy and jealousy god, feasting alone upon Olympus, while the nether world starved.' However, Shaka's character and Zulu philosophy prove otherwise.

The Mandingo too treasure the sharing of economic possessions. Sundiata fills his hunter's bag with vegetables and onions and gives them to the three women who had been sent to test and kill him. He even tells them that the garden belongs to all and so

they should come back if ever they run short of supplies. In reality, the garden does not belong to everyone. The implication is that no one should be denied access to produce from the garden. Those who have, always have an urge to share with those who do not. Writing on Ghana (which formed part of Old Mali), Armah (1973, 17) says, 'Our way is hospitable to guests,' meaning the people do not eat in concealment, but share what they have with others. Africans share most things, including folktales, which belong to everyone as soon as they come out the narrators' mouths (Achebe 1989, 47). Thus no one claims individual ownership to whatever they have produced.

4.2. Self-reliance, hard work and creativity

Another economic aspiration of the Zulu and the Mandingo is to be self-reliant. The societies always strive to produce enough wealth, both material and economic, for use by members. In *Emperor Shaka the Great*, Senzangakhona brags that the Zulus are proud and they beg from no one (1979, 47). He says this because the Zulus have many herds of cattle, land, dogs and live amidst a lot of wild game. This wealth satisfies most of their needs. As such, they do not beg from anyone. Begging does not make a people proud but is a symbol of insufficiency. It destroys the creative genius in a people. Shaka is convinced that white people are not self-reliant, hence they roam the earth, begging for land and cattle. Yet they claim that they have lots of wealth in their mother country. Shaka exposes the paradox of white people's claims (1979, 211):

When I asked them (whites) of the life in their lands

They spent much time telling me of their wealth and prosperity

But the prosperous people never leave their homes to roam the earth.

Shaka reveals that it is shortage of resources and necessities that compels and drives people around the earth because the rich cannot beg. In contrast, the Zulu do not roam places, looking for resources. They have enough food, medicine and doctors amongst themselves. Mqalane, one of the Zulu doctors, testifies that there are many types of healers in Zululand; some use herbs while others are diviners who attend to the mind.

Being a people who treasure self-reliance, the Zulus celebrate hard work and creativity. These two values are at the core of production. Praise names and praise songs feature a lot among the Zulu and are meant to challenge individuals and the group to work hard and produce more for society. The creative mind is very much celebrated among the Zulu. Shaka is surprised by the effects of the white man's gun, but also sees its weaknesses (Kunene 1979, 315):

We must learn to use it and make our own

Above all, we must improve on its speed

Avoiding the need to reload with every strike.

What is clear is that there are certain gadgets and possessions which the Zulus do not have. However, they do not borrow such things blindly. They study whatever they borrow and see how good or bad it is for them, so that they adopt and adapt it to their conditions and needs. The people desire to improve on what they borrow, and more importantly, to make their own gadgets which resemble the new ones. Thus they are a creative people who strive to be self-reliant.

Similarly, the Mandingo are a hard-working people who produce a lot of wealth such that the city of Niani flourishes with fish, rice and minerals. When Sundiata establishes an era of peace, the people have an opportune time to farm and produce in abundance. Such riches and self-sufficiency compel griots to sing (1965, 82):

If you want gold, go to Niane for Boure Bambongon and Wagaden work for Niani.

If you want fine cloth, go to Niani, for the Mecca road passes by Niani.

If you want fish, go to Niani, for it is there that the fishermen of Maouti and Djenne come to sell their catches.

If you want meat, go to Niani, the country of great hunters and the land of the ox and the sheep.

What makes the Mandingo self-reliant is the emphasis placed on responsibilities. Some people are hunters, others farmers and merchants, others iron smiths and traders, and they all work hard and excel in their duties. Their creative potential also enables them to produce a lot of wealth. In addition, they engage in trade, which enables them to have commodities that they do not produce in bulk. This makes them a self-reliant society. They do not borrow, or go around begging for necessities. With borrowing comes the danger that the goods may be asked for at any time, even while the borrower needs them most. Also, people may exploit the borrower's unfortunate status to enslave them. Thus the Mandingo, like other Africans, are not so much enthused by what one has in life, but rather by how they have achieved it (Rukuni 2007, 95). In this way, they are like the Zulus who produce a lot of wealth through hard work.

5. POLITICAL VALUES

The Zulu and Mandingo also share similar political values that include democracy and peaceful co-existence. When he becomes king, Shaka is democratic in his governance. He allows his subjects to participate in the affairs of the state and utilises their ideas. When they prepare for battle against Zwide, Shaka tells his commanders that he has his own strategies but needs to know what they have in mind. Having been given the platform to contribute (1979, 244):

Zulu commanders sat in seclusion, assessing events of the day.

Mgobhozi of the mountain often intervened.

Giving this and that comment, eager to alert others

He initiated many plans to cripple the enemy tactics.

Finally Shaka who had listened attentively said;

“I have listened and am pleased with your suggested strategies”.

What is clear is that King Shaka knows and admits that wisdom is not in one head. If wisdom is not in one head, then it means one head cannot rule, because ruling requires wisdom. As such, there is great need for many heads to be consulted in order to come up with distilled wisdom. Rukuni (2007, 53) acknowledges that among many traditional African systems (such as the Zulu), decision-making is through a consultative process and there is no issue, big or small that would be abandoned just because people have run out of time.

As a democratic leader, Shaka also tolerates criticism. When the Zulus mourn Shaka's mother Nandi for several days, without undertaking any agricultural activities (threatening society with starvation), Shaka is criticised by Gala, son of Nodada. He acknowledges the criticism, bringing the mourning to an end. Again, at one point he establishes a law that all his soldiers should not marry and his army becomes strong and defeats several of its enemies. Having established peace, Shaka is then advised by some of his councillors to establish a new order allowing them to marry and he complies. He knows very well that his rule depends on the people, and so he tries to do what is good for them. In Zululand, most people who work hard are recognised and rewarded. When Shaka promotes any of his soldiers to the post of commander, he does so based on merit. This allows the Zulu to increase in both numbers and territory. Mzilikazi and his Khumalo clan desert Zwide to join Shaka, vindicating Gyekye's observation that one cannot choose his relatives but can choose a political kingdom to belong to (1988, 8). Thus people desert undemocratic leaders to join democratic ones.

Like many other African ethnic groups, the Zulu treasure peace and peaceful co-existence. To them, peace is the ideal. They strive for sound and healthy human relations. Members who destabilise peace are punished. The wars Shaka leads against many other clans are meant to establish and maintain peace in society. The likes of Zwide are fought against because they oppress people and harass them, destabilising relations. In one incident, when the Zulus are in battle, an elder brother who had remained takes advantage of the fact that his younger brother is away and takes his wife. After a court hearing, Shaka punishes the elder brother for irresponsibility and punishes Gcugcwu of the Wosiyana clan who steals the king's cattle, instead of simply asking for them. All these efforts are meant to maintain peaceful co-existence among people.

The Mandingo is also a peace-loving society. Sundiata feels obliged to the peaceful existence of his society. When Soumaoro destroys Niani, sending many fleeing yet eliciting the praise of others, Sundiata goes back to Niani with the idea of fighting him to establish peace in a land gripped by chaos. In the end, Soumaoro is defeated, ushering in

an era of peace in Niani. Thus, like the Zulus, the Mandingo can establish peace through war. To further instill peace, Sundiata redistributes land and power to his subjects. With no land, people easily rise against their king. In Niani, there are also poets who keep kings on their toes, criticising the king each time he fails or relaxes in fulfilling his roles. The poets provide the checks and balances to traditional leadership, so that a king does not rule as he pleases. They curb unnecessary egoistic tendencies. The poets also sway the king's emotions so that when he rules he does so out of reason and not emotion. All of this nurtures democracy.

6. CONCLUSION

The two epic texts indicate that African literature is indeed a celebration and an expression of African values. Such literature is indeed a soul of the nation. It is an encyclopaedic inventory of the social, economic and political values of the time. A study of African people's culture, history and values can thus be aided by a study of such people's literary works, for their literature is a mirror of their experiences and world view.

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