CHAPTER 21

A Tale of Two Epics: Homer's *Odyssey* and the West African *Sunjata*

Thomas J. Sienkewicz

This is a tale of two epics.[1] The first, the *Odyssey*, is an ancient Greek epic which dates back in some form to at least the eighth century B.C. It deals with the ten years of adventure experienced by the warrior Odysseus following the ten-year-long Trojan War, his struggle to return to his home and family on the island of Ithaka and his need to reestablish his authority at home after that twenty-year absence. Even if you have never read the *Odyssey,* you have probably encountered it in a number of ways. You may, for example, have seen *Ulysses*, the 1954 Hollywood film version of the epic starring Kirk Douglas as Odysseus or Ulysses, as he was known to the Romans. Or perhaps you have seen the 1987 *Duck Tales* episode entitled "Homer Sweet Homer" in which Donald Duck's nephews help Odysseus' son Telemachus on the journey he takes in search of news of his father in the first books of the *Odyssey*.

The second epic, the West African *Sunjata*, which probably originated in the thirteenth century A.D., is the tale of a great West African king who, in the thirteenth century, founded an empire called Mali.[2] *Sunjata* is widely known and appreciated throughout West Africa and is especially tightly bound with politics in the modern nation of Mali. This former French colony, once known as Soudan in French Equatorial Africa, celebrated its independence from French rule in 1960 by renaming itself Mali after the great empire founded by Sunjata many centuries earlier. The country's first president, Modibo Keita, claimed direct descent from the great king, Sunjata Keita. Ironically, when his government was overthrown by a military coup in 1968, Keita tried to escape along the same route Sunjata's antagonist, Soumaoro the blacksmith, used in the thirteenth century to flee from Sunjata. Keita was captured not far from the cave where Soumaoro disappeared after his defeat by Sunjata.[3] When I visited Mali in 1987, I was able to visit that cave, known as Kolikoro, which remains a holy place to this day.

But this epic does not just belong to Mali. The *Sunjata* crosses several modern political boundaries, including those of Mali, The Gambia, Senegal and Ivory Coast, where a number of

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[1]This is a revised version of "A Tale of Two Epics or What Do Ithacas Mean?" a talk presented at a Monmouth College Convocation, in October 1991. The conversational language of the original, addressed to an audience consisting primarily of first-year students who were reading both epics, probably for the first time, in what was then called Freshman Seminar, has been retained. All the notes, however, were added in 2024 for this printed version of the talk.

[2] The spelling of the king's name varies. The most common spellings are "Sunjata," "Sundiata," and "Son-Jara," but Sunjata is probably the most widely accepted version of his name. The hero's full name is Sundiata Keita but he is also referred to in various sources as Manding Diara ("Lion of Mali)," Sogolon Djata ("Son of Sogolon"), Nare Maghan, Sogo Sogo Simbon Salaba, and Mari-Djata. I have used "Sunjata" as the hero's name in this paper, because that spelling is widely accepted, but for other characters in the epic have generally used the names Niane (1965) used since that is the version of the epic the students were using,

[3] For a photograph of the area in which these events took place, see https://bluelatitudesgroup.rezdy.com/403170/koulikoro-historical-and-cultural-day-tour-with-squatted-camel-and-faramissiri-caves?_ga=2.136084467.37358494.1708128000-1258630545.1708128000&useTransparentSessions=1&currency=SEK&lang=sk The sign, written in French, reads in English: Nianankoulou. Here Soumangourou [i.e., Soumaoro] Kante disappeared in 1235.

closely related languages are spoken, including Malinke, Susu and Soninke. All these languages belong to a large ethnolinguistic group called Mande. Those who speak a Mande language are ancient and proud people with a long and well-established sense of history and a living oral literature. Despite their political divisions, the people of West Africa share a mutual heritage and genealogy in which they are able to express distinctly local elements of their culture and maintain, from region to region, differing versions of this heritage.

But what is all this about anyway? Why are Monmouth College Freshmen being asked to read not one but two epics in Freshmen Seminar? After all, an epic is, by nature, long and boring, right? The *Odyssey* runs some 24 books in Greek. Today we would probably call those books chapters. The original Greek version of the *Odyssey* is a poem written in blank or unrhymed verse in a meter called dactylic hexameter. You, of course, are not reading the epic in Greek but in English translation. Few translators of the poem have used this meter, which is not easily adaptable to the rhythms of the English language.[4] Some English translators have used iambic pentameter, the meter used by Shakespeare, a rhythm which is more natural to English.[5] Still others translate the poem into English using free verse of varying length.[6] Yet other translators have preferred to put the epic into English prose.[7] But whether prose or poem, the typical English translation of the *Odyssey* is about 300 pages long.[8]

The Sunjata can sometimes be just as long, although those who have not yet started to read *Sunjata* will be relieved to know that the version used in class is only about 84 pages long.[9] But these 84 pages may seem endless to Americans unfamiliar, as most are, with the cultural background of this West African epic.

Part of the problem, I think, is that we just do not understand epics anymore. A long, narrative poem? Who wants to read a poem, especially if it is as long as a book? We simply do not live in an age of epics, unless you count something like the *Star Wars* film series with its many links to the plot of the *Odyssey*.[10] Have you thought about how Luke Skywalker is like Telemachus, Odysseus' son? Or the ways in which Jabba the Hutt is like Polyphemus the Cyclops?

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[4] The most successful hexameter translation of the *Odyssey* in English is probably that of Lattimore 1967, but even he does not attempt to use dactyls in his translation.

[5] One modern example is Mandelbaum 1990.

[6] For example, Fitzgerald 1961.

[7] For example, Rieu 1991 and Shewring 1980.

[8] The version used by Monmouth College first-year students in Freshman Seminar in 1990 (Shewring 1980) was 296 pages in length.

[9] This version is Niane 1965. Several other versions of the epic were also available in 1991, when this paper was first presented. Laye 1984 is, like Niane's version, written in prose. The following versions of the epic offer transcriptions of actual performances: Innes 1974 includes performances by Bamba Suso, Banna Kanute and Dembo Kanute; Johnson 1979 is a performance by Magan Sisòkò; and Johnson 1986 one by Fa-Digi Sisòkò. For convenience of reference in this paper, the following shorthand is used for these seven versions: Bamba Suso (Innes 1974), S_1; Banna Kanute (Innes 1974), S_2; Dembo Kanute (Innes 1974), S_3; Niane, S_4; Magan Sisòkò (Johnson 1979), S_5; Fa-Digi Sisòkò (Johnson 1986), S_6; Laye, S_7. References in this paper to S_1, S_2, S_3, S_5, and S_6 are by line number and references to S_4 and S_7 are by page number.

[10] For thematic connections between *Star Wars* and the *Odyssey*, see, for example, Moyers 1988, a conversation between journalist Bill Moyers and the mythologist Joseph Campbell in a PBS series called *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*; Moyers 1991, a book based on this series; and Moyers 1999, a TV movie in which Moyers and George Lucas discuss Campbell's influence on *Star Wars*. At Monmouth College I taught a popular course called "Classical

Beyond the movie theatre, however, we Americans can't seem to sit still long enough for an epic. We are too busy moving on. Too busy changing the channel. As a nation, we are still waiting for some brave person to come along and compose our great national epic. But if we ever do get that epic, I think it will probably center around the settling of the American frontier. Such an epic may immortalize some sharpshooter alone on the prairie wearing a badge and traveling around on his horse making the wild west safe for civilization, perhaps Bat Masterson or the Lone Ranger, or even Monmouth's own native son, Wyatt Earp.

Wyatt Earp, in fact, would, in many ways, make an especially good subject for an epic. His famous shootout at the O.K. Corral is certainly as exciting as Odysseus' lopsided shootout with the suitors and has been the subject of more than fifteen films.[11] Earp certainly has the right stuff to become an epic hero. Even the circumstances around his birth have heroic undertones.[12] While born of ordinary parents, like the rest of us, Earp's birth is surrounded by heated historical controversy in Monmouth over the actual location of his birthplace. Was he really born in the house known as the Wyatt Earp Memorial located at 406 South Third here in Monmouth or was he actually born somewhere else within the city limits? While many townspeople believe he was really born at 406 South Third, others are convinced he wasn't. Monmouth College's Dr. Urban, who has spent many hours researching this question in libraries and courthouses both here and in Iowa, has argued that Earp was not born at 406 South Third.[13]

While I don't wish, by any means, to cast aside the importance of historical accuracy or to imply that the debate surrounding the Earp birthplace is insignificant, I suggest that from an epic or poetic point of view the truth does not matter much. What matters is the image. The image of a local boy made good; the image of a local boy whose deeds and reputation bring fame to his hometown.

This is exactly what has happened with both the *Odyssey* and *Sunjata.* In both epics accurate reporting of actual historical events has taken second place to telling a good story, to describing the deeds of Odysseus and of Sunjata in an epic fashion. In this context the word "epic" takes on the meaning "exaggerated," as in the phrase "It was a lie of epic proportions." The *Odyssey* functions in a world of magic and ogres and divine apparitions which most of us dismiss as a fairy tale world, as fiction. It is not surprising that in the nineteenth century many logically minded historians agreed and concluded that there had been no Trojan War, no Trojan horse, no Troy, and certainly no historical Odysseus. These same people were astonished to learn in 1870 that a German archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann had unearthed the remains of a city on a plain in what is now Turkey, right where Homer said Troy was located.

Mythology and Star Wars" and in 2016 I read a paper entitled "Teaching 'Star Wars' and Classical Mythology" at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

[11] For a lists of Wyatt Earp movies, see https://www.imdb.com/list/ls090999607/ and https://www.imdb.com/list/ls025409183/.

[12] According to Raglan 1934 and 1936, the lives of many heroes follow a similar pattern, including unusual circumstances surrounding their births. For a summary of Raglan's hero pattern, see Sienkewicz n.d. 1. For the hero pattern applied to Sunjata, see Sienkewicz n.d. 2.

[13] See, especially, Urban 1980. For additional references to the controversy surrounding Earp's birth, see Urban n.d.

Since we now know that the city of Troy really did exist, maybe there is some historical truth behind the *Odyssey* and its companion epic the *Iliad*.[14] The extent of the reality behind the Homeric epics involves a complicated picture of archaeological and literary record and lies outside the scope of this presentation. My point is that from a poetic point of view, it doesn't matter much whether Odysseus really saw a Cyclops or really killed the suitors the way Homer says he did, any more than it matters from a poetic point of view whether there really was a Troy or a Trojan war or which house in Monmouth saw the birth of Wyatt Earp. What matters is not distinguishing truth from exaggeration. What matters is how the story is told and the effect this story has on the society in which it thrives.

The same is true for *Sunjata*. Here, too, we cannot entirely sort out historical fact from poetic fiction. We know that Sunjata ruled Mali from about 1230 through 1255 because his reign was mentioned in a fourteenth-century Arabic historical encyclopedia entitled *Book of Lessons* by Ibn-Khaldun.[15] But, beyond the mere fact of Sunjata's actual existence, few details of his life are certain. There are simply no reliable contemporary sources and the legend itself has been worked and reworked in West Africa through oral tradition for seven centuries.

Furthermore, like the *Odyssey*, *Sunjata* is filled with what we would call superstitious elements like magic spells, witches and jinns or genies, all part of the native, animistic religious beliefs of West Africa. Both Sogolon, Sunjata's mother, as well as Soumaoro, his antagonist, possess special magical powers linked with the animistic world. Several multiforms spend a significant portion of the epic tracing the animistic powers of Sunjata's mother back to the jinn of Du Kamisa, the Buffalo woman.[16] Using his animistic powers as a blacksmith-magician, Soumaoro fills his palace with enchanted artifacts like death's heads which can come to life.[17] And this king can only be defeated with a counterspell--the spur of a white rooster--which overpowers his animistic powers.[18] We react to such magical elements in *Sunjata* with the same rational skepticism with which we view the Cyclops or Circe the witch in the *Odyssey*.

We are also disoriented by what might be called anachronisms in the epics. Sometimes even the great Homer nods, so to speak, and refers to things which could not have existed at the time in which the epic is set.[19] One example of anachronism in *Sunjata* is the mention of guns and gunpowder at various points in the epic.[20]

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[14] There have been frequent attempts to prove that many of Odysseus' exotic adventures in the *Odyssey* can be traced to real places in the Mediterranean, for example, Brown, 2020; Symeonoglou 1988; and Symeonoglou 1996.

[15] Kitāb al-ʿIbar [Arabic: كتاب العِبَر "Book of Lessons"] in seven books. Ibn-Khaldun mentions Sunjata as Mari-Djata in the 7th book which is a history of the Berbers and of the Muslim Dynasties of North Africa, including Mali. For a discussion of the historical accuracy of Ibn-Khaldun's early history of Mali, see Austen 1996.

[16] S_4: 6–9; S_5: 73–940; S_6: 339–997; S_7: 35–64.

[17] S_7: 175.

[18] Sunjata's sister, Nana Triban, tricks Soumaoro into revealing his secret in S_1: 769–778; S_2: 1658–1661; S_3: 901–904; S_4: 64; S_7: 172.

[19] In the introduction to his translation of the *Odyssey*, Lattimore 1967: 18, for example, lists the following anachronisms in the epic: "Sicilians, Phoenicians in the western seas, Dorians in Crete, consultation of oracles."

[20] Guns are used, for example, during Sunjata's circumcision ceremony at S_2: 866–873 and a rifle is used in an unsuccessful attempt to slay Du Kamisa, the Buffalo Woman, at S5: 553–565 and S6: 694–697. Firearms, however, probably did not reach the Manding region of West Africa until the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, at the earliest. See Brahm 2020.

More recent historical events are also integrated into *Sunjata*. Versions of the epic sometimes contain references to Musa Molo, a jihad leader and insurrectionist of the late nineteenth-century, or to Fodé Kaba, archenemy of both Molo and the French colonials.[21] These references provide thematic links between the distant epic past of Sunjata and the twentieth-century audience. But they also distort the historical fiber of the epic.

Other anachronisms in *Sunjata* are related to the integration of Islam into the originally animistic epic. Here one can see the traditional religions of West Africa coming to terms with the increasing presence of Islam. Islamic influence apparently appeared in the area within one hundred years of Sunjata's death. One of his successors, Mansa Musa, was certainly Muslim, for in the fourteenth century he made a hadj about which even Europe heard rumor. Mansa is illustrated seated on his throne in the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.[22] Despite the Islamic faith of Musa, it is probable that Sunjata himself was not a Muslim and that many people in West Africa retained their animistic beliefs for several centuries. Only in the nineteenth century did Islam begin to make larger inroads in the area, mostly due to population upheavals and traumatic jihads in the 1840s.[23] It can therefore be assumed that integration of Islamic themes into *Sunjata* was a gradual process which strengthened in the nineteenth century.

Sometimes in the epic Islamic themes displace traditional animistic elements. Some genealogies of Sunjata show Islamic elements and Sunjata not only becomes a Muslim but also a descendant of a servant of the Prophet Muhammad.[24] On other occasions Islam is the ally not of Sunjata but of his antagonist, Soumaoro, who, in Banna Kanute's version of the epic (S_2) consults with the first four tribes of Mali to convert to Islam in his struggle with Sunjata.[25] Even though this part of West Africa is overwhelmingly Muslim today, tension between animism and Islam remains essentially unresolved in the epic.

We are also confused by the many oral features of these epics, which are meant to be performed, not read. You should not imagine ancient Greeks enjoying the *Odyssey* or West Africans enjoying the *Sunjata* the way we quietly enjoy a good book under the shade of a tree in summertime or in the cozy warmth of our homes in wintertime. Both the *Odyssey* and *Sunjata* are meant to be experienced in public gatherings, at parties and, yes, even at religious convocations. These epic performances have more in common with rap sessions than with formal lectures or concerts.

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[21] In S_1: 1222–1243 Bamba Suso sketches the conflict between the Muslim Fode Kaba and animist Musa Molo in The Gambia in the nineteenth century and thus links Sunjata's story with more recent Gambian history.

[22] For information about this atlas, see Wikipedia 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catalan_Atlas. Musa's image is included on this website at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catalan_Atlas#/media/File:Catalan_Atlas_BNF_Sheet_6_Mansa_Musa.jpg.

[23] For an overview of Islam's history in West Africa, see Hill 2009.

[24] In $S_4S_5S_6S_7$.Sunjata's paternal genealogy traces his ancestors back to Jon Bilali (known in Arabic as Bilal bin Rabah, i.e., Bilal the Slave) who was a servant of Muhammad and the Prophet's second convert to Islam.

[25] Banna Kanute's version of Sogolon's long pregnancy is structured around a series of four ominous consultations by Sumaoro with the leaders of the five Marabout clans of the Manding. In each of these consultations, which will continue after Sunjata's birth, the inevitable rise of Sunjata is predicted and given further Islamic sanction by association with these clans, called "Manding Moslem" (*Manding Moori*) which were the first by tradition to convert to Islam (Innes 1974: 245).

The singer expects frequent encouragement and approval from the audience. Not just applause but verbal interjections, shouts of approval, and even questions. The special circumstances of the performance of *Sunjata* which I witnessed in Mali in 1987 illustrate the conversational aspect of performance. On this occasion the singer, performing in a West African language called Bambara, stopped his performance periodically so that his song could be translated into French and then into English for his foreign audience. It was not long before the performance became an exchange between singer and translator with the singer working the ancestors of the translator into the song and the translator responding with pleasure whenever his ancestors were mentioned.

The rhapsodes, i.e., the singers, of ancient Greece would sing their epics to audiences large and small and they would expect rewards in return. So, in the *Odyssey* Odysseus rewards a singer with a choice piece of meat at a banquet.[26] Similarly, West African griots perform in public and expect rewards for performances well-done. In one of the most memorable scenes in *Sunjata* the griot borrows Soumaoro's balafon, a musical instrument something like a xylophone, and sings such a good praise song in honor of the blacksmith king that Soumaoro gives the balafon to him.[27]

Performers in both *Odyssey* and *Sunjata* describe people and things repeatedly in the same way. How often in Homer is Athena called "owl-eyed" and the dawn "rosy-fingered"? Odysseus is "the man of wide-ranging spirit," "acquainted with many perils," "patient" and "crafty." Sunjata is Na 'Kamma, "the man who had a mission to accomplish" and "the man with two names." Such descriptive phrases, called epithets, can not only take the place of the hero's name, but also define his personality.

Odysseus is also identified by his father's name, "son of Laertes." This is called a patronymic. The use of patronymics was common in ancient Greek society and reflects the patriarchal nature of that society. By contrast, Sunjata is not only called Maghan after his father, but also Sogolon Djata after his mother. The use of a matronymic as well as a patronymic for Sunjata complements the major role which Sogolon, Sunjata's mother, plays in the epic and demonstrates a matriarchal feature of Manding society.

Epithets are not the only kind of repetition in the *Odyssey*, in *Sunjata*¸ and in epics in general. Type scenes of welcoming guests, banqueting, arming, departure or arrival in both epics frequently repeat the same language from one passage to the next.[28] These standardized phrases or formulae are used to describe actions which occur several times in the plot. Homer's language is so formulaic that some speeches repeat almost word for word. Try repeating yourself like that in an English 110 composition assignment and see how far that gets you.

Furthermore, this formulaic language is repetitious not only within a single performance, but from singer to singer and from generation to generation as performers borrow epithets and formulae from their predecessors and hand them down to their successors. When students try

[26] *Odyssey*.8.477–478.

[27] S_7: 176.

[28] For example, at *Odyssey* 1.135–142 and 4.52–59 identical language is used to describe the welcoming of guests with water to wash, a table set with bread, and meat served by a carver. At S_1: 218–219; 223–224; 226–228 nearly identical language is used in reference to people and things Sunjata needs to take with him into exile.

to do this today with writing assignments, professors frown and call it plagiarism. But in the context of the oral performances of the *Odyssey* and the *Sunjata*, it is called oral tradition.

Despite all this repetition, however, each performance of an oral epic is very different from the next, for epic singers do not usually memorize their songs word for word. Instead, they memorize epithets and formulae and build their song from these smaller components. This process is usually called composition in performance.

Singers of *Sunjata* are themselves aware that they each sing the epic in different ways. Banna Kanute, for example, says that:

> You see one griot,
> And he gives you an account of it one way,
> And you will find that that is the way he heard it;
> You see another griot,
> And he gives you an account of it in another way
> And you will find that what he has heard
> has determined his version.
>
> S_2: 8–13

Such variability is less evident in the *Odyssey* because sometime in the sixth century B.C. an official version of the epic was published in Athens and this version became the one everyone used and still uses. English translations may sound different but all are working from the same Greek text in which the *Odyssey* is divided into 24 books and which begins with the travels of Odysseus' son Telemachus, flashes back to the travels of Odysseus himself and ends with the hero's dramatic return to Ithaka and his defeat of the suitors.

But, unlike the *Odyssey*, there is no official version of *Sunjata*.[29] Each version is very different in many ways from the next. Some of these differences are due to the way in which the epic was written down. While five of the English versions are based on actual transcriptions, or recordings of live performances, two, including the one being read in Freshman Seminar, are literary reworkings, that is, the epic has been liberally revised and polished by the editor or author.[30] I refer to several of these versions of *Sunjata* in this presentation because I am convinced that a fuller understanding of this epic is only possible by reading multiple versions of the epic.

The plot of *Sunjata* contains several recurring thematic parts. In each version there are passages describing the miraculous conception, birth and childhood of the hero; his exile; and his defeat of the Susu king Soumaoro to become ruler of Mali. While these sections may be expanded or contracted, they usually appear in each version. To this narrative core, several sub-tales are sometimes added, including, at the beginning, stories about the Buffalo woman and about Sunjata's mother. At the end of the epic the defeat of Soumaoro is often followed by another series of battles and events related to the founding of the Empire of Old Mali.[31]

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[29] In addition to the seven versions of the epic available in English translation when this paper was first read in 1991, Bulman 1997 lists fifty-seven versions of the epic published in various African languages, in French or in English translations.

[30] As noted earlier, $S_1S_2S_3S_5S_6$ are transcriptions of performances while S_4 and S_7 are literary reworkings.

[31] See, for example, S_2: 2032–2063; S_4: 82–83; and S_7: 218.

Thus, each version of *Sunjata* differs distinctively from the next. Sometimes the epic may vary as the singer creates an epic appropriate to the people in the audience. The singer of the performance I attended in Mali in 1987, for example, adapted his song to the interests of his translator.

Or the epic may vary according to the place where it is performed. In one town in West Africa the tale may be told one way and in a second the tale will be told another way. For example, Bamba Suso's version of *Sunjata* (S_1) was performed at a school in Brikama, a town in The Gambia. This version has a notable emphasis on genealogies, on the aetiologies or origins of family names and on the foundation legends of towns near Brikama—information which is not found in other published versions of the epic. These special features may be due to the fact that the griot was asked to tell the pupils "something of the history of their people" and "to give as full an account as possible."[32] Brikama is not mentioned in the other variants but receives particular notice in this performance, in which it is mentioned that Brikama was settled by Sankareng Madibe Konte, Sunjata's maternal grandfather and one of his generals. It is no coincidence that the chief of Brikama at the time of the performance claimed descent from Sankareng.[33]

As a result of all this variation, the biographical details mentioned in the various versions of *Sunjata* are a jumble of contradictions and cannot always be accepted as fact.[34] Instead, the life of this historical ruler has become a unifying element and cultural linchpin which unites diverse traditions, genealogies, and histories. In a similar way Odysseus' story has become part of our cultural heritage. Argus, Odysseus' dog, left behind in Ithaka when the hero left for Troy, recognizes the scent of his disguised master after an absence of twenty years, and has become the epitome of a faithful canine.[35] Penelope, Odysseus' wife, has become a symbol of long-suffering and fidelity. Telemachus is the model son determined to prove himself worthy of his absent father. So, too, Odysseus has become the archetype of the man who returns after a long absence, like Bilbo Baggins in Tolkein's *The Hobbit*. Odysseus is also the courageous wanderer, the restless soul who lives from one adventure to another, like Don Quixote chasing windmills or Captain Kirk on the Starship Enterprise.

Sometimes history even seems to imitate the *Odyssey*. After he leaves Calypso's island Odysseus is caught in a storm and manages to swim to a strange island with the aid of the wreckage of his raft. So, too, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus is said to have been shipwrecked in 1476 off the southern coast of Portugal following a sea battle. Columbus managed

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[32] Innes 1974: 37.

[33] Innes 1974: 128–129.

[34] Sunjata's paternal genealogy is a good example. While the paternal genealogies of the hero in $S_4S_5S_6S_7$ have Sunjata descend from Bilali, the servant of the prophet Muhammad, the name of Bilali's descendant who settled in Mali is not consistent among these variants. While S_4S_5 agree on the name of this ancestor, they offer different degrees of relationship with Bilali. He is Bilali's son in S_4 but his grandson in S_5. S_5S_6 agree on the generation which immigrated to Mali but disagree on the name of this grandson of Bilali. There is even less uniformity among the variants in the multi-generations between arrival in Mali and Sunjata's father. Such fluidity of genealogical material is not unusual in oral contexts.

[35] *Odyssey* 17.290–305.

to swim to land with aid of an oar and eventually married into a good Portuguese family, just as Odysseus is offered the hand of princess Nausicaa before he leaves the island of the Phaeacians.[36]

The spirit of this adventurous Odysseus is captured in "Ulysses," a famous poem by the Victorian Poet Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose hero refuses to remain quietly at home in Ithaka after killing the suitors.[37] Tennyson's hero laments that

> It little profits that an idle king,
> By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
> Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
> Unequal laws unto a savage race,
> That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
> I cannot rest from travel: I will drink Life to the lees.

Odysseus is thus the restless traveler, and it is no coincidence that the word "odyssey" which simply means in Greek "the story of Odysseus" has come in English to suggest a long journey, like the one in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

And if Odysseus' odyssey becomes the model for the odyssey of others, so does his home, Ithaka. C. P. Cavafy, a 20th-century modern Greek poet, reflects on the universal aspect of Odysseus' island home in a poem called "Ithaca"[38] which begins with the following advice:

> When you start on your journey to Ithaca,
> then pray that the road is long,
> full of adventure, full of knowledge

Note that in this poem it is not Odysseus who is beginning this journey. It is the reader. It is each of us. Cavafy then advises us not

> to hurry the voyage at all.
> It is better to let it last for long years;
> and even to anchor at the isle when you are old,
> rich with all that you have gained on the way,
> not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Cavafy warns us not to be disappointed if we do not find Ithaka to be what we thought it would be.

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[36] This incident is told by Ferdinand Columbus (also known as Hernando Colon, 1488–1539) in his biography of his father, *Historie del S. D. Fernando Colombo; nelle quali s'ha particolare, & vera relatione della vita, & de fatti dell'Ammiraglio D. Cristoforo Colombo, suo padre: Et dello scoprimento ch'egli fece dell'Indie Occidentali, dette Mondo Nuovo*. See Keen 1992: 12-15 for an English translation of Columbus's experiences in Portugal. Phillips and Phillips 1992: 95 question the historicity of this story with the comment that "such drama has all the markings of a scene from heroic epic."

[37] For the full poem, see https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses.

[38] Translation from Modern Greek by Rae Devlen. For the full poem, see Devlen 1989: 36.

> And if you find her poor,

Cavafy concludes,

> Ithaca has not defrauded you.
> With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
> you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

So what do Ithakas mean?

Because the *Odyssey* has become so much a part of our literary heritage in the west, because the *Odyssey* is so important a thread in our cultural fiber, Ithaka no longer belongs to Odysseus alone. Odysseus' island belongs to all of us. It has become a symbol of the quest, of the goal to which everyone is striving.

From this point of view, even Sunjata has his own Ithaka, his own quest, his own home. What is Sunjata's Ithaka? On one level it is Mali itself. It is his homeland from which he, like Odysseus, is absent for a considerable portion of the epic. On another level. Sunjata's Ithaka is his heroic quest, his drive to greatness which he shares with many other characters in the epic, including his antagonist, the blacksmith king Soumaoro, and with his griot and his mother.

This tendency to speak of Sunjata's (or anyone else's) Ithaka illustrates the extent to which ancient Greece in general and the Homeric epics in particular have framed intellectual discussions in Europe and America. So central is this cultural framework that one mark of a well-educated person in our society is familiarity with the literature of Greece and Rome. Anyone lacking such familiarity, anyone who has not read the *Odyssey*, will miss the point of much of what many writers and artists are saying. They will not understand Tennyson's poem or Cavafy's or James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922). They may enjoy Walt Disney's *Duck Tales* version of the *Odyssey* without this background, but they will miss a whole level of fun and amusement.

Consequently, over the years, many people have looked upon the Greeks and especially the Homeric epics as special, as uniquely able to express universal themes which are meaningful cross-culturally. And, as we have just seen, Greek myths like those in the *Odyssey* have come to be used as standard themes and points-of-reference for Western artists, writers and poets. As a result, the survival of Greek mythology in the modern world has often been interpreted as a sign of the universality of Greek mythology, of its unique adaptability to different and changing social and cultural needs.

This view of Greek mythology as both unique and universal among the world's mythologies is brilliantly voiced by George Steiner, a major literary critic of our time. In a study called *Antigones*,[39] Steiner proposes that there is an inseparable link between the Greek language and Greek myths, a link by which the syntax of the Greek language and the myths expressed in this syntax reflect basic, universal human experiences and forms of expression. For example, Steiner argues that the myth of Prometheus, the Titan god whose name means "forethought," is connected with the future tense.[40] Similarly, the first-person singular pronoun, "I," is represented

[39] Steiner 1984.
[40] Steiner 1984: 136–137.

by the figure of the narcissistic Narcissus so engrossed in himself.[41] In Steiner's view this basic bond between Greek mythology and the Greek language creates a collection of myths which incorporates all the diverse modes of human language and experience. In short, for Steiner and many others, the Greeks have said it all and little original material has been left by the Greeks for later generations or other people to develop. From this point of view, Greek mythology is "special" and the Greeks are "different" from the everyone else.

But universality is not unique to the *Odyssey*. It can also be seen in the literature of other cultures and time periods, including *Sunjata*. And, at the end of the twentieth century, we are positioned at an exciting turning point. A point at which we must make some important educational and philosophical decisions.

One route we could take would be to follow the example of our cultural forebears in Europe and America, declare the primacy of Western culture based upon Greco-Roman civilization and continue to belittle the cultures of the rest of the world. We can stick our heads in the sand like ostriches and ignore the points of view of Africa and Asia and South America.

Or we could abandon our own cultural heritage, which has in recent times been labeled as sexist, racist and worse, and restrict ourselves to points of view which are politically correct, non-controversial, and not offensive to any particular interest group. We could stop reading the *Odyssey* because it is too "old," too difficult, too European, and too male. After all, one might argue, why should we celebrate Odysseus who is unfaithful to Penelope throughout most of the *Odyssey* while Penelope is expected to remain absolutely faithful? Isn't this a double-standard? Isn't this sexism?

It certainly is sexism, but does this mean we should no longer read the *Odyssey*? Certainly not. Abandoning the *Odyssey* would mean unraveling the very fabric of our culture. We can only understand ourselves better by looking back and learning from the mistakes of the past. Abandoning the *Odyssey* would mean losing our cultural anchor, our starting point for understanding the world around us. Abandoning the *Odyssey* would mean losing our Ithakas.

What we really need is a convergence of cultural perspectives, a decision not only to learn about ourselves but also to use the knowledge we gain to learn about others. As Americans we can't read only American history and expect to understand the rest of the world. Nor can we only read the *Odyssey* and expect to have all the resources we need to fully understand the human experience.

The *Odyssey* is not an exception, but a model. We should not read the *Odyssey* in isolation but should use our familiarity with the *Odyssey* to assist us in understanding the literature of other cultures, like those of West Africa. This is why the Alternative Cultures component of the Human Societies requirement in the Monmouth College General Education Program is so important. Studying a different culture confronts us with different mind frames and world views and encourages us to better understand our own mind frame and world view.[42]

On the one hand, *Sunjata* is like the *Odyssey* in that it, too, deals with universal themes of life about the hero, and his relationship with his family and with society. On the other hand,

[41] Steiner 1984: 137.

[42] In the academic year 1991–1992, Monmouth College students were required for graduation to take one course dealing with an alternative culture. For a list of courses which fulfilled this requirement see Monmouth College 1990:17.

the *Odyssey* is like *Sunjata*. Its culture is not totally a universal culture. That is, despite the popular belief that the Greeks are special, that they express ideas which can be understood apart from cultural and historical contexts, epics like the *Odyssey* and *Sunjata* must be interpreted in the context of their own cultural environments. On this point Steiner is wrong. The Greeks have not said it all.

The view that the Greeks are special has recently been challenged by a Belgian cultural historian named Marcel Detienne. In the first chapter of his book called *Dionysus Slain*[43] Detienne affirms that "The Greeks Are Indeed Like the Others" that is, like everyone else, the Greeks expressed themselves in ways which are culturally specific. Detienne rejects the idea that the "original" Greek version of a myth is the purest, the most universal. Instead, Detienne prefers to read all myths, including Greek myths, within their ethnographic contexts. In particular, Detienne asserts, it is the variants, the different versions of the epic, which show the essential fluidity of myth. Such variation occurs as myths are reworked and adapted to changing times and different locales. Epic and society evolve together. And this symbiotic relationship between epic and society allows traditional tales to adjust to changing social and political needs.

On this point the Greeks are no different from the others.

The *Odyssey* reflects the society in which it flourished. Even the Homeric epics reveal a tension between local diversity and cultural unity. One of my graduate school professors, Gregory Nagy, now at Harvard University, has argued, for example, that in the *Iliad* a more localized myth in which Achilles is at odds with Odysseus was eventually replaced by a quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon which appealed to a broader cultural base.[44] The more pan-cultural the myth strove to be, the less local it became.

This tension between local variants and cultural cohesion can be seen not only in the Greek experience but also in medieval Christian Europe and in the Islamic world. In all three contexts there is a diversity of local multiforms overspread and controlled by a dogmatic religious and cultural center. In the ancient Greek world cities like Delphi and Athens often served as processing centers for pan-cultural versions of local myths. So, too, was medieval Rome the religious and cultural unifier of a disparate and diverse Christian Europe. Indeed, Rome has long maintained psychological authority over culture and has often used a combination of imprimaturs and an Index of Forbidden Books to determine the official versions of the lives of the saints and other religious texts. In a similar way, Mecca has functioned for the Islamic world not only as a religious center, but also as a source of many pan-cultural myths, such as those which bind Sunjata to the life of the prophet Mohammed.

This tension between myth and society is the social glue of epic. Social concerns often determine the plot of the poem. One theme which both *Odyssey* and *Sunjata* share, for example, is the theme of guest-friendship, or *xenia*, as it was known to the Greeks.

The customs which determine social interaction between guest and host are of major concern as Odysseus confronts the uncivilized Cyclops in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*. Polyphemus spurns *xenia*. He refuses to treat his guests hospitably and instead eats them for dinner. Penelope's suitors are not good guests either. They stay in Odysseus' home beyond their welcome and consume his wealth. Their deaths are justified by their failure to respect *xenia*.

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[43] Detienne 1979.

[44] Nagy 1998.

In *Sunjata* the theme of hospitality emerges especially in the period of the hero's exile when he visits a king named Mansa Konkon and barely escapes a deceitful death at his hands.[45]

The relationship between the two epics and their societies is also expressed in the person of the singer. The West African singer or *jeli* is known more commonly in English as a "griot." While the etymology of "griot" is mysterious, the word possibly originated in the Portuguese word *cria* "to educate, to instruct" and comes into English from the French and has been used extensively since the 1960s to refer to West African singers.

Traditionally, the *jeli* was a member of a hereditary caste of singers who were linked family by family with specific tribal rulers. Thus, a singer from the Kouyate family has always been the *jeli* of the ruling Keitas of Mali and says that

> There is a special relationship
> Between the members of the Keita family and the
> members of the Kuyate family.
> Even today, if a member of the Kuyate family
> deceives a member of the Keita family,
> Things will go badly for him.
>
> S_1: 470–475

The traditional *jeli* also served as the chief's spokesman or herald and advisor. Bala Fasséké, Sunjata's griot, frequently functions in the epic as the hero's spokesman and agent.[46]

A similar relationship existed between Greek rulers and Greek singers. King Agamemnon left a singer behind as an advisor to his wife, Klytemnestra, when he sailed for Troy[47] and Odysseus makes a special point of sparing his unfaithful singer, Phemios, when the suitors are killed.[48]

These singers are not merely entertainers. They are also historians. Singers recall and preserve the great deeds of the past. The adventures of Odysseus at Troy were already part of the repertoire of singers in his lifetime, for the Phaeacian singer Demodokos knew them and sang, at Odysseus' request, about the story of the Trojan horse.[49]

In return for these services, singers look to their patrons for financial support. Thus, Odysseus maintains the singer Phemios in Ithaka and a destitute Sunjata struggles to satisfy the needs of his demanding griots, who, the griot Bamba Suso tells us,

> . . . went and begged from him.
> When they went and begged from him,
> He did not have anything.
> He went and got honey in the bush,

[45] S_4: 28–38 and S_7: 150–164.
[46] E.g., at S_4: 58–59 and S_7: 194–196 the griot rouses the troops on behalf of Sunjata.
[47] *Odyssey* 3.265–272.
[48] *Odyssey* 22.330–377.
[49] *Odyssey* 8.469–520.

And brought it back for the griots.
Whatever he gave them, they did not scorn it.
S_1: 142–147

The trauma of colonial rule has brought about many social and economic changes in modern West Africa. These changes have included a decrease in the power and wealth of traditional chiefs and a parallel decrease in the modern griot's duties and social status. Traditional occasions for performance of the griot's song have become more and more rare and, without wealthy chiefs to support them, the singers have found it difficult to retain their position in society. The following lament reveals the griot Banna Kanute's frustration with the current situation:

In Sunjata's day a griot did not have to fetch water,
To say nothing of farming and collecting firewood.
Father World has changed, changed.
S_2: 320–322

The importance of the griot also emerges from the epic in other ways. In one song, the only part of his inheritance that Sunjata wants are his father's griots and the hero frequently develops a close bond with his singer.[50] Sometimes Sunjata even serves his unsuspecting singer flesh from his own thigh when both are starving on the savannah.[51] Time and again Sunjata is unable to accomplish his tasks without the assistance of the singer. Sometimes the griot's song provides the hero with direct support, when, for example, Sunjata tries to walk for the first time[52] or when the hero prepares for his final encounter with Soumaoro.[53] The *jeli* can also use his song to transform the hero's uninspiring or disreputable actions into praise. When Sunjata runs away in battle, the griots are able to save the hero's reputation by making the incident part of Sunjata's praise name.[54]

Not only is the role of singers in *Odyssey* and *Sunjata* worth noting. So is the role of women. On the one hand, in both epics male domination or subordination of the female is prominent. The *Odyssey's* double sexual standard for males and females is paralleled in *Sunjata* by polygyny, and especially by the bitter rivalry between Sunjata's mother and another wife of his father.[55]

On the other hand, maternal ties are particularly important in West African culture and are emphasized in the epic by Sunjata's ties with his mother, Sogolon. The hero's special powers are derived from his mother's identification with Du Kamisa. Both women are deformed outcasts from society who possess great occult power,[56] Furthermore, it is an insult to his mother that

[50] S_1: 125–127.
[51] S_1: 441–451.
[52] S_4: 20–21; S_7: 132.
[53] S_2: 1874–1878.
[54] S_1: 670–692.
[55] This rivalry is described widely in the early part of the epic; for example, see S_5: 980-1034.
[56] In S_4S_7 Du Kamisa is merely a shriveled old woman, but in S_5S_6 she has been physically mutilated by the King of Du who has cut off her breasts. Similarly, Sogolon is described as a hunchback in S_4S_7 and in S_5S_6 she is covered with

persuades the young and apparently crippled hero to stand up and walk for the first time at the age of seven.[57] Later in the epic, the exiled hero cannot return home and achieve victory over his antagonist Soumaoro until his sickly mother has died.[58]

Sometimes her death specifically becomes an occult sign of Soumaoro's impending death at the hands of Sunjata.[59]

Ties between brother and sister are also strong in West African society and are reflected in the close relationship between Sunjata and his sister Nana Triban. Like her mother Nana Triban is another necessary adjunct to Sunjata's heroic power. Every published version of the epic includes a scene in which the hero's sister seduces his antagonist and learns the secret of Soumaoro's power.[60] Without this information, Sunjata would never have defeated Soumaoro.

Sunjata's bonds with his griot, his mother, and his sister illustrate the close relationship between the West African hero and other members of his society. The hero of the West African epic succeeds only by means of a collective effort while the hero of the *Odyssey* usually faces his adventures alone. Sunjata acts in concert with others, while Odysseus acts as an individual.

So, in his confrontation with the Cyclops Odysseus pulls all the punches himself.[61] It is Odysseus who makes Polyphemus drunk. It is Odysseus who figures out how to blind the Cyclops and how to escape from the cave by hiding under the sheep. In this adventure Odysseus' men are no more than helpmates for the hero or fodder for the Cyclops and, in the end, it is only Odysseus, not his men, who returns home safely to Ithaka.

By contrast, in the true spirit of African solidarity, Sunjata shares his epic and can even change roles with other characters in the epic. The most striking example of this interchangeability occurs in "the balafon scene." In this episode the first balafon is discovered and played. In one version it is Soumaoro who obtains the instrument and plays it.[62] But in another it is Sunjata who performs the same deed.[63] In several versions a griot comes upon the instrument, plays it without permission, and is hamstrung by the owner, sometimes Soumaoro[64] and

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warts. One of her epithets is "Sugulun-of-the-Warts" (S_5: 838, 845, 865, 866, 868, 877; S_6:880). These deformities lead to the exclusion of both women from their communities.

[57] In $S_2S_4S_5S_6S_7$ Sunjata's inability to walk leads to other women insulting his mother because she has no healthy son to collect baobab leaves for her culinary use. This goads Sunjata to learn to walk.

[58] For example, at S_1: 393–399 Sunjata stands by his sick mother's bed and says

> "If I am to be king of Manding,
> Before dawn breaks tomorrow, may you be dead.
> If I am not to be king of Manding,
> May you remain ill,
> Because I will not leave you here in illness."

The next morning Sogolon was dead.

[59] At S3: 450–478 Sunjata goes into the bush and prays that, if he is destined to defeat Soumaoro, all the leaves fall off the tree in front of him. When the tree becomes bare, he then prays for the return of the foliage as confirmation of the prophecy. When the tree's leaves are restored, he then asks for his mother's death as further confirmation of his destiny. When he returns from the bush, his sister meets him with news of their mother's death.

[60] For example, S_1: 693–830.

[61] *Odyssey* 9.82–566.

[62] S_3: 118–203.

[63] S_2: 1415–1525.

[64] S_3: 283–325; S_5: 2591–2683; S_6: 1798–1868.

sometimes Sunjata,[65] in order to keep the griot from leaving and to make him the balafon owner's personal griot. In this way, Sunjata shares his epic with his antagonist and the lasting glory of the song is enjoyed by both the hero and his antagonist.

In the *Odyssey*, however, Odysseus' victory over the suitors is a personal victory, not a communal one. Odysseus himself plans the attack on the suitors and kills them off with the help of only his son and a few faithful slaves. Neither the suitors nor their families share in his success and his glory.

By contrast, Sunjata even shares the supreme moment of victory with others, at the firing of the special arrow used to defeat Soumaoro. In one version of the epic, it is Sunjata himself who makes the shot.[66] In another it is the hero's maternal grandfather, Sankareng.[67] In yet a third the ancestor of the griot's host is said to have been the successful marksman.[68]

So who shoots Soumaoro? The only real answer from a West African perspective is that everyone has. Soumaoro is shot not only by the individual who shoots the arrow, but by everyone who participates in the event, in the performative present as well as in the epic past. That is, the poem is not only the tale about its characters; it is also about its audience, as illustrated by the griot's use of direct address, which often integrates members of the audience directly into the epic. While direct references to individuals present in the audience are entirely absent from the rhapsodes' songs in the *Odyssey*, they are not at all uncommon in the West African epic. Frequently, this direct address consists of explicit advice to members of the audience, such as the following plea made by a singer to his host:

> Seni Daabo, do something, sir;
> Life consists of doing something,
> Not of doing everything,
> For there is no end to that, and failure wins no support.
> S_3: 67–70

With these words a griot named Dembo Kanute encourages his host, Seni Daabo, to imitate the hero Sunjata and to perform deeds worth remembering and being recorded in song. If you wish to be remembered, do something, says the griot. His listener is being challenged to become a hero. And so is everyone else. This is perhaps the most significant way in which *Sunjata* differs from the *Odyssey*. In West African epic all members of society, living and dead, are considered part of the epic and share in the heroic action while listeners and readers of the *Odyssey* both in ancient Greece and today realize that they cannot be like Odysseus, that he is different, that the Greek hero Odysseus is part of a heroic society in the distant past, that there could never be any more heroes like Odysseus.

In *Sunjata*, on the other hand, this is not the case. Sunjata's actions do not set him apart from his contemporary society and from the modern West African world. He is not a hero who is

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[65] S_2: 1548–1556.
[66] S_4: 65; S_7: 294.
[67] S_1: 835–836.
[68] S_3: 956–980. The marksman here is Sanatara Fofana Darbo, the ancestor of Seni Darbo, in whose honor this version was performed and who recorded this version of the epic.

different and solitary. He is a West African hero because he is an active member of his society and because other members of his society help him. Not only is Sunjata, as the victor over Soumaoro, the savior of his society, but his victory also becomes the means to the heroic apotheosis of his whole society. He is a communal hero and his story becomes a national epic and the source of unity out of diversity. The West African emphasis is not on the isolated individual as a hero but on the heroic individual as a member of a community. Sunjata's success is their success, too. Unlike the Greeks, for whom there was an unbridgeable gap between the present and the Heroic Age, West Africans have a sense of communality with their great past and its hero who becomes a hero of the present. In the process, Sunjata has given us a fuller picture of what Ithakas can mean.

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